

William J. Hamilton, Jr. of Cornell, The Man and the Myth

Honors Thesis

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by

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Under the Supervision of Professor Charles R. Smith

*We refer to a certain elusive quality, which doubtless will be explored and exploited many, many years hence by some future biographer in a privately circulated volume entitled;*

**William J. Hamilton, Jr. of Cornell, The Man and the Myth**

(Robert W. Harrington, Jr., Dear Bill Book<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dear Bill Book* is a compilation of letters which was given to Professor Hamilton upon his retirement in 1963; it will be referred to from here on as DBB.

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*Your inexhaustible fund of humorous stories,  
“Hamilton stories” will never be forgotten and  
really should be collected and published.  
Although the world may not yet be ready for some  
of them! A good laugh is at least as valuable  
today as ever. (Bill Dilger, student and colleague,  
DBB)*

## 1. Preface

I first heard of William J. Hamilton Jr. while sipping aperitifs after a holiday dinner at the home of the professor Charles Smith. He had invited all his teaching assistants from his Field Biology course as a gesture of good tidings. As the conversation turned to the early years of natural history at Cornell, the name and legend of Wild Bill Hamilton surfaced. It was here where I first encountered the truth and legend of one of Cornell's most prominent professors of natural sciences. I began uncovering story after story. It was from these early stories that I became enchanted with William J. Hamilton, the man and the myth. When I told friends about Hamilton their eyes lit up and they said, "There was a man like this at Cornell?" And as I looked to Bill's contemporaries and graduate students, I realized the depth beyond these stories of his outrageous pranks. They spoke of a man who was a legend in his own time. He was a man who enthused people with his clarity of thought and his cunning wit, a man who inspired a whole generation of students to pursue mammalogy professionally, a man who was fascinated by the commonplace – who believed that as much could be learned from a common robin as from a rare wood duck.

Professor Hamilton was a great naturalist whose specialty in mammalogy only exceeded his knowledge in other fields of natural history. "It was hard to find something that he didn't know a lot about. For example, if you were opening a shelf fungus, and he found the beetle...He knew quite a bit about that beetle, although he was not an entomologist. If you were looking at some wildflowers, and you happened to find some fairly obscure wildflower, he could tell you quite a bit about that. It was amazing. It wasn't just mammals." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

As he accumulated honors, he was never overcome with hubris, knowing too well that the paucity of his knowledge was overwhelming. His advisees appreciated him for "showing that men at the top can be very human and have a little fun along the way." (C.H. Wharton, DBB)

I have accumulated stories about Bill from those who knew him. These stories of his warmth, his wit, and his humor reflect how beloved he was even fifty years later -- "...there is an intense loyalty and respect your students radiate when they discuss their association with you." (Arthur D. Hasler, DBB) As his students and colleagues pass away, his memory recedes. May his memory live on in the stories he told and others told of him.

## 2. Introduction:

*I'm sorry that our students will not know you, only the legends.*

(Lyle M. Thorpe, DBB)

William J. Hamilton, Jr. lived his life as though he had no choice. To those who knew him, he was sometimes gruff in demeanor, though lucid with words. "His outstanding character was that he was very friendly if you talked to him to get below his gruffness." (Howard Evans, 2006). Bill was a, "serious student of plants and animals, practical joker, hard worker, and loyal friend [which was] a hard combination to match." (Eph Palmer, DBB). "Few people become a legend during their lifetime... Through a unique combination of academic achievement, prankster's humor -- a willingness to meet all men as equals and to share your knowledge with them, and unpretentious humanity that is his real as it is rare." (Lyle Thorp, DBB). Hamilton published extensively, kept a detailed daily journal for over half a century, taught thousands of undergraduate students and guided 150 graduate students. He was equally comfortable in front of a class lecturing, trapping animals in the field or tending to his garden.

To his students he was an over-the-top lecturer as well as a brilliant and demanding professor. Large in voice, stature and character, Bill "Didn't suffer fools gladly. [But] If you weren't one he would do anything for you." (Bill Dilger, 2006). He was sharp witted and quick tongued, "He was great that way. He would think of things on the spur of the moment that you or I would think later that night. ...He was quick." (Bill Dilger, 2006). As a Professor, Hamilton added extensively to the field of mammalogy from his firsthand knowledge of the animals. He had the patience to satisfy his curiosity. What other people tended to overlook, he looked into. He was a man,

### Historical Foot Notes

There was a young fellow named Bill  
Who came to Cornell on the hill  
He planned just a week  
Education to seek  
But good heavens he's living here still

Bill's love is for all furry creatures  
They are his life and his teachers  
Just give him a skunk  
Or a tiny chipmunk  
It will light up all of his features

Ask Bill for the name of his pet  
He'll say I really forget  
But show him the scat  
From a rat or a bat  
And he'd tell you just what it et.

Bill's weakness is seegars and drink  
Not cocktails as you fellows think  
But formal -- forty percent  
Deadly to normal-sized gent  
And he takes it right from the sink

It's no wonder when Bill went to war  
And we never will know just what for  
They gave him a job  
In the sanitary squad  
With the mice and the rats he'd adore

Bill said he would never marry  
That his life was for mice and things hairy  
But when he met Nellie  
His brain turned to jelly  
That's why Grandpa Bill is so scary

Bill says that he is retiring  
Long before the age for the firing.  
If he can swing it that way  
Oh praise be the day  
We will all stand around him admiring.

(Arthur Allen, DBB)

*"The more you know, the more you see in the environment and the system that you're in... I think that he just knew an enormous amount about plants and animals and virtually all natural systems. He was constantly curious about it and he was constantly seeing things that triggered thoughts and opportunities, research questions and memories." (Mike Richmond, 2006)*

“Driven by curiosity. He would stop to listen and stop to look and take the time to investigate things along the trail that he hadn't seen before or even in his own garden” (Mike Richmond, 2006).

Time and time again, Bill emphasized how little was actually known about the animals he studied, “Practically nothing is to be found in the literature dealing with stomach examinations of...” (Hamilton, 1930). “Surprisingly little has been written concerning the breeding habits and home life of...” (Hamilton, 1929) Summarily, he states that, “The paucity of published information regarding our small mammals is amazing. Details of their lives, which can readily be determined by careful study, have not met proper attention which this highest class of vertebrates deserves” (Hamilton, 1933).

“I used to be somewhat amused but still very much impressed by your enthusiastic interest in the life histories of various mammals and how amazed you were about how little was actually known about them. In the span of 35 years, you have filled in many of the gaps in the life histories of these mammals and you can be very proud of the contributions that you have made to mammalogy.” (Albert S. Hazzard, DBB)

Bill understood how spotty our understanding of mammals is, “He did feel like there is a lot to do right here and he did do a lot right here with the small mammals and the plants that were around” (Mike Richmond, 2006). With so much to be done there was no time for arrogance. He was very skeptical of arrogance and was very suspicious of pomposity. “He couldn't stand any professors at Cornell that had posture. He could see through anything that rang of phoniness.” (Tom Eisner, 2006)

“With today's extreme specialization in all fields of scientific endeavor, it will be increasingly more difficult to find a naturalist who is an expert in one discipline and yet who has a broad background and comprehension in all related fields.” (Robert M. Roecker, DBB)

This pursuit, to understand the natural world, drove him to continually search for natural truths. “He was incredibly knowledgeable and representative of the old-school of natural history. He knew everything” (Tom Eisner, 2006). “You weren't with him long before you knew that he knew” (Verne Rockcastle, 2006). “Hamilton not only was an eminent mammalogist, but he was a fine naturalist. He knew plants, birds, mammals [and] reptiles.” (Charles Smith, 2006) He was, “one of the nation's leading herpetologists, mammalogist, and ecologists” (William E. Werner Jr., DBB).

His students admired him for his teaching and his tall tales. “To begin I can tell you that he was an inveterate practical joker and that whenever you talked with him you had to be careful that he wasn't pulling your leg” (Allen Benton, 2006). “Bill Hamilton certainly has a thriving fan club to this day...He is remembered fondly by all, even amazingly by people he made no bones about disliking, who he considered out-right idiots. He pulled it off with great finesse” (Nina Lambert, 2006). “Perhaps the greatest tribute that I can pay you is...I have never heard any person say anything

“Humor depends on the understanding of incongruity. That's what science is all about, incongruity and trying to understand it.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

against you.”(William E. Fahy, DBB) Students would swap stories of *Hamiltoniana*. “I remember that we used to get together and tell stories about Hamilton” (Howard Evans, 2006).

*Still another measure is the number of tall tales told of a man by eager students. As you must be aware, the stories involving you are legion. They mean that you and your influence and your teachings will live long in many hearts.”* (Harlan P. Banks, DBB)

The stories of William J. Hamilton, Jr. have come filtered through the memories of those who recount them from decades past. Some of the stories have been directly witnessed; others passed down through the ranks of students, and others Hamilton propagated himself. “Certainly they became embellished as they went through different hands.” (Harrison Ambrose, 2006) Separating legend from fact has been a challenge. In this project I will recount peoples’ memories of Bill Hamilton -- the man and the myth.

“He could sit right here and say, “Do you realize that black is actually white?” And you’d wonder why you hadn’t thought of that yourself a while ago.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

*Is there a current Bill Hamilton on campus? If there is, I don't know of him. There are some people who are vertebrate zoologists, but they're not Bill Hamilton. I don't mean that as a put down, but they don't do things as he did.* (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

At the meeting of the American Society of Mammalogists in 1978, Hamilton was being recognized by the Society as a past president and a significant member of the mammal research and teaching cadre that existed. “There were probably, I’m going to guess, 400 people at this national meeting of the American Society of Mammalogists. In recognizing Hamilton, the then president of the Society brought Bill up on the stage and said a few things about him and then he...asked all of those people in the audience who were students of Bill Hamilton’s from 1940s to the 1960s...to stand up. There were about 30 students or so. The 30 that stood up were all mammalogists teaching at different universities sprinkled throughout the country employed in the teaching and research profession in mammalogy or vertebrate ecology. Then he asked for the students who had finished since 1960 who had studied with Hamilton and they stood up. They likewise were all basically gainfully employed and he made the comment about this. He said [that] we’re basically looking at the core of people who teach in our profession here and the same core of people who do research and have graduate students. Then he asked [that those who stood up to] remain standing. There were about 50 people at that time. Then he asked for the graduates of these people who were standing in the audience that were there. About half of the audience stood up. Then he asked of the people who were basically traceable back to [Hamilton]... I think there may have only been out of 400 to 420 people -- maybe 15 or 20 people sitting down. Virtually everyone was connected through a first or second or third generation to Hamilton and his teachings. So he had a



tremendous influence on the subject. I was certainly impressed by that. It's amazing, just amazing.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

Hamilton was an exemplary naturalist during an era when “first-hand, everyday, practical knowledge of the vertebrate animals they were dealing with” was essential to be a field biologist (Verne Rockcastle, 2006). However it is clear that,

*It wasn't just Hamilton who helped create this bevy of outstanding vertebrate zoologists, vertebrate biologists, wildlife scientists, wildlife biologist or whatever we wanted to call ourselves or wherever our professions turned. [The] aggregate of having all of this vertebrate biology in one building, seemed to have a tremendous impact on the science. I think it occasionally comes together at other universities for other kinds of subjects [where you have] a tremendous growth and a breakthrough in the subject matter and ideas and interests. Hamilton was a key to much of that here because he had this great fertile mind and was in a situation where other people were doing similar kinds of things with their own subject matter. I think it has spawned an incredible amount of knowledge and opportunity for others who are still working with the findings that these folks have made.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)*

### 3. Childhood

Bill's father, William Hamilton Sr. underwent a harrowing childhood. His parents died while he was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. At the age of thirteen he set out to find work to support his younger siblings. He gained employment working as a "Long Island Railroad...telegraph operator." (William J. Hamilton, Jr. oral histories, 1986 (Known from now on as H.I. – Hamilton Interview)) It was there that he would overhear the businessman chat about their investments. He put money aside and started making real estate investments. With great foresight or just sheer luck, he purchased real estate in Manhattan before the depression. "He started a bank and a newspaper, to invest his money in the bank himself, and the newspaper to advertise his real estate holdings around Corona." (H.I.) In the paper, he had a love column to the "lovelorn." (H.I.) "He would write these letters -- make up the questions and answer them himself. No one ever caught on to that." (H.I.) The Hamilton estate in Flushing, New York that occupied an entire city block was a beautiful compound that included a rose garden. It was there that Bill grew up with his two brothers; Douglas who later became a professor at the Columbia University and an attorney for the New York Herald Tribune and George, his younger brother, became a sugar broker (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006). Bill was, "A black sheep. He was not conventional. His whole family was real staid, banker-type people, [who were] rather well off. He didn't want to get into that type of business. He thought that it would be quite humorless I suppose. But he was not like that. He was like a weird branch off the [family] tree" (Bill Dilger, 2006).

Born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July, 1902, Bill grew up less than 10 miles from Times Square, "but in the early part of the century, about 1915 or so, the area was a haven for interesting animal and plant life." From a young age, Bill "followed [his] interests" in Natural History (H.I., 1986). His parents were "good Methodists" and sent Bill to Sunday school. Around Easter when he was seven years old, the teacher gave him and the other students a potted hyacinth. He "kept it going for several years before it gave out." (H.I.) This was Bill's introduction to horticulture. His mother nurtured his curiosities and bought him his first book on natural history when he was 10. It was "a fine little bird book", something that he could slip into his pocket (H.I.). By the spring of 1912, he knew every bird that he saw, "even the warblers." (H.I.) Neither of Bill's parents were naturalists, "No one in the family... had this interest." (H.I.) Bill's father believed that he couldn't make a living teaching and thought that his son should go into business, although his mother, Charlotte Richardson Hamilton, encouraged her son's interest, she was a "dear lady." (H.I.) It took Bill two to three years to develop his interest in Natural History. During that time he had a crony, Al Standfast, and they would, "collect bird eggs [and] collect fish...together." (H.I.) Hamilton and Al would come home, "traipsing home bedraggled, muddy and tired, strongly smelling of skunk cabbage from Kissena Lake marsh." (Elliot Weier, DBB) They "Had a wonderful time." (H.I.) However, "[They] were shunned because natural history seemed effeminate at the time." (H.I.) Hamilton noted though that, "We were big fellows and no one ever bothered us because we could whip them all." (H.I.) In fact, Bill was 6'4" and a star of his high-school football team.

Later Bill's passion moved to snakes. He became "acquainted with an advertising man in New York City named Eugene Gillam, who squandered his time chasing snakes -- poisonous snakes -- all throughout the Northeast." (H.I.) They would take the train to the Ramapo Mountains 30 miles from Manhattan. During the first week of May and the first week of October they would catch the rattlesnakes as they went in and out of their hibernation dens. "With a little short, forked stick we would pin them down and [grasp them] behind the head and drop them into a pillow [case]... We would bring back ten or twelve rattlers back to the Bronx Zoo... where we sold them for a dollar or two apiece... My mother was horror stricken." (H.I.) He would keep the snakes in his closet overnight before he would take them to the zoo.

He earned pocket money "quite differently from those who washed windows and cleaned houses." (H.I.) Bill's interest in zoology had an entrepreneurial bent. It was here in "Flushing Meadows outside metropolitan NYC [that he] spent his childhood catching small mammals and other such in the open marshes... He earned money selling specimens to companies like Edmund Scientific Corp." (Nina Lambert, 2006) From 1919 to 1920, Hamilton dropped out of high school for five weeks to catch muskrats for four dollars to pelt. He made "\$1600, which was a substantial amount for a youngster in those days, even today." (H.I.) "He actually told me that he used to trap cats and he sold cat pelts. He made more money trapping cats than muskrats." (Howard Evans, 2006). LaGuardia airport was built where he used to go trapping in the swamps there. He was an outdoor guy no matter where he was." (Howard Evans, 2006)

He would go down to the mud flats where LaGuardia Airport is today and dig soft-shell clams with a spading fork. After school on Friday afternoons Bill would go to "Kissena Park in Flushing and collect watercress and sell it to the ladies at ten cents a bunch. And we would collect perhaps 150 to 200 bunches. The leaves were so large and so green that the ladies were non-plused." (H.I.) He also "made bird houses and sold them under the guise of raising money for Boy Scouts, but we really pocketed the money for ourselves." (H.I.) He "collected the cocoons of big silk moths and sold them ... to a little shop on Lower Fifth Ave, New York, which sold butterfly jewelry." (H.I.)

Bill collected fish in milk bottles and brought them home to identify, "We had no books on fish



**Figure 1: The Hamilton Family, Bill is the first child from the right**

at home, but we did have the Book of Knowledge, about 10 volumes of it. I finally determined that the fish was a lung fish. A Lungfish is restricted to Australia, South America and Africa. But here it was in Flushing Meadows. It had to be a lungfish. And that's what I called it until the year when I was 14 years old when I was given a book by David Starr Jordan entitled *The Manual of Vertebrates*. There were keys -- I never used one -- key to determine -- what the animal was. And this book dealt with the vertebrates east of the Mississippi there in a matter of minutes I keyed up the fish to a mud minnow and that started my interest in fish, as well as other vertebrates. That was my introduction to Jordan, and I think fondly of him over the years. He was one of Cornell's greatest sons." (H.I.)

Daniel Carter Beard was another person to increase Bill's early interest in Natural History. Beard was, "The father of Boy Scouts in this country." (H.I.) As a 13-year-old boy Bill was "dragged along" with a garden club to Cos Cob, Connecticut to see Dan Beard's country home. Beard "wrote a great many books dealing with natural history." (H.I.) Beard had a home that was, "only a couple of city blocks from" his home. They became friendly and Beard asked Hamilton if he would like to work in his camp, The Dan Beard Outdoor School, in Pike County, Pennsylvania. Beard couldn't afford to pay him but he did offer "chewing gum money" for the summer. (H.I.) Hamilton was one of the only young men who was a counselor at this camp. It was Bill's "introduction to teaching." (H.I.) He worked at the camp for three summers.

It took Bill four and a half years to get through high school because he had fallen "through the ice and got pneumonia two or three times trapping muskrats." (H.I.) In the days before "the famed drugs of the present times" he would be out of school for three months. (H.I.) In February of 1920, Bill graduated from high school. His parents hadn't gone to college and they wanted him to go. At the time he had desired to go, "to get introduced to the scientific field." (H.I.) "I was going to be a professional man -- I hope to be -- and it was either in the field of natural history or medicine." (H.I.) He applied (and was later admitted) to Harvard, "simply because [his] brother was going there." (H.I.) A high school teacher of his, Professor Wood showed him a Cornell catalog. He took it "home and opened it up and there were courses offered in birds and mammals and fish and beetles and snakes and all sorts of things." (H.I.) He said, "Good heavens, if I can get into Cornell, I'm sure going there." (H.I.) He chose, "Cornell over Harvard just for the range of courses" (Howard Evans, 2006)

## 4. Cornell Student

Bill was admitted to Cornell and he came in the second semester of 1923. He was one of ten students who were entering in the spring semester. At that time there were a third of the buildings that are here today and 4000 students. Davey Hoy, the university registrar, “looked at [Bill’s] transcript and berated him and told [him] to go back home.” (H.I.) Hoy said that, “Everything was in disorder.” (H.I.) Scared, Bill left the building and went across the street to Goldwyn Smith and “Hid behind some of the big elms...until Davey Hoy went out to lunch.” He then raced over to Morrill Hall and asked the secretary, “What’s wrong with my transcript?” (H.I.) The young man in the celluloid collar took a look at it and said, “Hamilton, it’s all in order. Here, I’ll sign it.” (H.I.) The secretary then told him, “Now, listen, Hamilton, never let Davey Hoy see you again in the next four years.” (H.I.)

For his first semester Bill registered for a course in Introductory Entomology with Gracie Griswold. He asked her if he could take her course. She replied, “Why, Mr. Hamilton, you are just entering school. You haven’t got any prerequisites for this.” (H.I.) Not knowing what the prerequisites were Hamilton replied that he was, “a specialist in *Lepidoptera*” – butterflies and moths (H.I.). She then countered, “What is your specialty?” (H.I.) Hamilton quickly replied, “*Noctuidae*” - which are cutworms and the like (H.I.). Miss Griswold decided to give Hamilton a chance. He felt so good getting into the course that he didn’t study, “I thought I knew all the answers. On the first test I got a grade of 40.” (H.I.) The professor called him up to her desk and said, “Why, Mr. Hamilton...I thought that you were a specialist in entomology?” (H.I.) Bill said that he would study from then on and he got a hundred in every quiz after that, “I had to...but that gave me a good lesson.” (H.I.)



Figure 2: Bill as a young man

There was a young man from Long Island  
Went from sea level up to highland  
Up there at Cornell  
He rang a loud bell  
That was heard from the wet to the dryland

(Unknown, Dear Bill book)

*My interest in small forest mammals was first aroused when, as a college freshman, I was botanizing one spring in a beech woodland. In attempting to remove a handsome moccasin flower, roots at all, from the deep carpet of dead leaves and rich black earth, my fingers pushed into cavities were not root-made. Exploring these galleries further, it was soon evident that they were of some magnitude, running just beneath the leaves or joining with deeper tunnels which coursed through the thick black mold fully eight-foot beneath the canopy of the dead leaves above. The orchid was temporarily forgotten, and a busy hour was*

*spent tearing away the detritus, turning half rotted logs and always exposing the labyrinth of little highways that threaded through the forest floor. Occasionally these would emerge on the surface, exposed and conspicuous to the trained eye and then disappeared beneath the base of a rotted stump or similar obstruction. A few snail shells, the whorls neatly bitten out, lay in several of these burrows, and once, upon turning a rotted log, I found a nest of shredded beech leaves, sodden and long unused, which had probably housed the occupant of the passageway. But not a sign of the creatures responsible for these tunnels! Determined to learn something of the habits of small mammals, for it was obviously the work of these which I had encountered, I returned the following week, armed with a dozen mousetraps. These were baited with walnut meat, and placed across the runway so that any animal running by would hit the pan and be captured. The following morning my efforts were rewarded by the capture of a fat short-tailed shrew and a handsome red-backed mouse. This experience opened an entirely new world to me, one which has held my steadfast attention for many years. I have set many thousands of traps in various habitats of different states, but the thrill of the expectation is still with me when the morning rounds of the trapline are made. Every so often a rarity is captured, or a particularly interesting individual is taken. (Hamilton, 1940)*

As a student, several professors particularly impressed Bill. Professor Needham could “talk to the audience and draw with both hands on the board at the same time.” Arthur Allen, the birdman would take overnight field trips to neighboring towns so they could rise early with the birds. Albert Hazen Wright who taught Vertebrate Zoology and was known for his frog book and snake book. “There were so many good men and fine teachers.” (H.I.)

In his boyhood young Bill Hamilton  
Got rich of the muskrats he’d skin.  
But he switched to exdysis of rats and mice  
That ain’t worth a nickel a ton  
(Phil Allen, Dear Bill Book)

Bill’s time spent at Cornell was “a revelation.” (H.I.) He had, “A wonderful time up here.” (H.I.) At the end of his senior year, Bill was planning to go to “Bolivia to collect birds for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.” (H.I.) He was fortunate to be offered an assistantship in the biology department at Cornell by A.H. Wright. “I came under his tutelage because I was interested, of course, in the

#### **Poaching in Ringwood Preserve**

Hamilton was on his knees poaching a plant in the Cornell University property called the Ringwood Preserve when he saw a pair of muddy boots in front of him. Looking up, he saw Ladd, then Dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University. Ladd demanded to know what he was doing. Bill blurted a nervously lame response. Ladd pulled himself up to his full height, looked Bill sternly in the eye saying, “Son, do you know who I am!” Bill answered meekly, “Yes sir.” There was a long pause. Then Bill asked, “Sir, do you know who I am?” Ladd said no. Whereupon Bill said “Thank God” and took off. (Nina Lambert, 2006)

field he was in; and as a consequence, I was attracted to his courses. And he must have

been attracted to me because he asked me to become his instructor when I finished my graduate work. And I stayed with him until his death.” (H.I.)

It was “Wright who recognized Hamilton’s ability as a zoologist and who hired Hamilton as a mammalogist. For Wright to hire Hamilton and get him on the faculty must have taken some doing.... He was a real Brooklyn kid; he always had a Brooklyn accent. ... At that time Cornell was a real Ivy League snob place.” (Howard Evans, 2006).

“I was always impressed with the elegant Brooklynese with which he explained the material...” (E.W. Pfeiffer, DBB)

Hamilton lived in the fish hatchery with the permission of Professor George Embury, a Professor of Fish Culture, in exchange for some help around the place. A group of graduate students lived there together. It was at the Hatchery that Bill Senning, Bill Royce C.A. Tyron Jr. and Pete Tack enjoyed an “education in many of the finer things of life” (C.A. Tyron Jr., DBB). Hamilton and others would meet up “once a month for a friendly game of poker at the old fish hatchery on.” (Paul R. Needham, DBB)

Hamilton made some extra money there by hanging up charts for professors. These were the days before projectors and Kodachromes. All of the illustrations were on charts. For ten minutes work he was paid twenty five cents which could buy him a “three course meal.”

In the summer of 1927 Bill traveled to Cuba for five months to study an insectivore: a mole by the name of *Solendron cubanus* which “Was the size of a big house rat.” (H.I.) After traveling on a fruit ship, he was dropped off at Baracoa, Oriente: a province in Cuba on the eastern half of the island. As he left the ship they warned him, “Now, don't go up to the hills on a white horse and don't carry a gun. There's a bandit up there.” (H.I.) Nonetheless, Bill traveled on a white mule and carried a shotgun and headed for the hills. After five weeks of searching, he found none of the animals he was looking for. He did not know it when he went there but “it was non-existent then.” (H.I.) Thomas Barbour, the director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, funded Bill’s trip in hopes of finding the Royal Woodpecker, *Carpintero real*, also known as the Cuban Ivory billed Woodpecker, “but that too was non-existent” (H.I.).

From Cuba he went to Panama and Costa Rica to collect for the Harvard Museum. This frustrating and unfruitful trip was his, “Introduction to the American tropics” and in a large way shaped his philosophy of science. (H.I.) This trip formed his belief in *Backyard Biology*, the idea that you didn't have to go to the tropics, or some remote place to discover scientific wonders, but rather, this could all be discovered right at your doorstep. “He was a firm believer in not going to the tropics all the time but doing some research on animals in your backyard” (Tom Eisner, 2006). Bill believed that the science of Natural History was still largely uncharted and as much could be learned from abundant animals in your own backyard as from rare animals across the world. “So it's a commonplace that I [urge] people to study [the common animals] rather than the rarities.” (H.I.) The prevailing trend, however, judging by the journal articles of the time, was that most people went to the tropics to do their research, “I thought then that you had to go far afield to get an unusual animal to work on. And I came back and I soon discovered our unexplored backyards... We could deal in quantity, we could get to them, and we could find out and explore the behavior biology of [the] commonplace.” (H.I.) “Right here in Tompkins County we have a rare field to study these common animals,

which are still largely unknown. That's why I elected to choose this area for my research projects.” (H.I.) Later on in life colleagues asked him, “‘Why don't you go west for your work.’ There were teeming billions of ground squirrels mammals are so abundant. Well, many of them out in the west are diurnal so you could see them and that's why you think they're more abundant.” Bill believed that “the totally unexplored areas at home are just fine study areas.” (H.I.)

*Few nature lovers, or, for that matter, professional biologists, are acquainted with this world of the leaf mold. The songs and bright colors of birds, the shade-loving flowers and ferns which carpet the woods, even the fungi and slime molds, engage their attention, but few know or recognize the many small mammals which spend their lives hidden from human eyes. The reason is not difficult to understand. Many are nocturnal, nearly all are shy and retiring, and most of the species spend a greater share of their active hours in subterranean burrows, prying beneath a thick carpet of leaves or humus in their incessant search for food. Most of these little mammals are unspectacular in appearance, none are so brilliantly colored as our birds and as a consequence few people are attracted to them sufficiently to study their ways and habits. (Hamilton, 1940)*

“He was a great spokesman for the native fauna. He made a case at a time when the vogue in biology was to go to Costa Rica and the tropics, not to look under cow patties in rural Ithaca. He, as a mammalogist, said that you could just look in your backyard and find piles of discoveries about the local fauna, the local mammals. At that time I was kind of neutral about this. I, was myself, so eager to do research in exotic areas ...So I was not really on his side but with time I came to appreciate his role.” (Tom Eisner, 2006)

“Having gone off to [Cuba to] find what had apparently become a rare lizard and not finding it drove him back home. I think that that really in some ways describes his attitude about work. He did feel like there is a lot to do right here and he did do a lot right here with the small mammals and the plants that were around. And my sense of him from the time I spent around him, he saw opportunity everywhere. He had just a fertile mind that would allow him to take what he knew and imagine beyond that and just see opportunity for research and for interesting things or for humor. [He would take] a plant from the wild and grow it in captivity ... or in a cultivated system and getting it to do well. He was just interested in a vast array of natural thing...” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

Had he gone to South America, Bill felt that he would have ended up being a professional collector, “for the rest of his years.” (H.I.) Being at Cornell allowed him to do original work. For the next four years he held an assistantship that allowed him to do graduate work.

In the summer of 1928, Bill went to Mt . Katahdin, to enjoy the “rugged grandeur” of the Northern Basin with Francis Harper. Here they played “Hide-and-seek with the big Black Bear ... [caught a ] fine series of Water-shrews ...[discovered] seeds in the cheek pouches of Peromyscus, in preparation for winter storage; and [saw a] bull Moose feeding in Sandy Stream Pond...0.2 miles away.” (Francis Harper, DBB)



## 5. Starting a Family

Bill met his future wife Nellie Rightmyer, the daughter of a local florist, while he was a teacher's assistant for Albert Hazen Wright's course in Vertebrate Zoology. Professor Wright remembered Nellie from his class. While teaching, he remarked, "We sometimes find a single big *Ambystoma* egg marble. Low and behold, [she brought in] 15 to 18 the next morning. [During a lecture, I remarked, ]"To catch [spring] peepers is difficult."



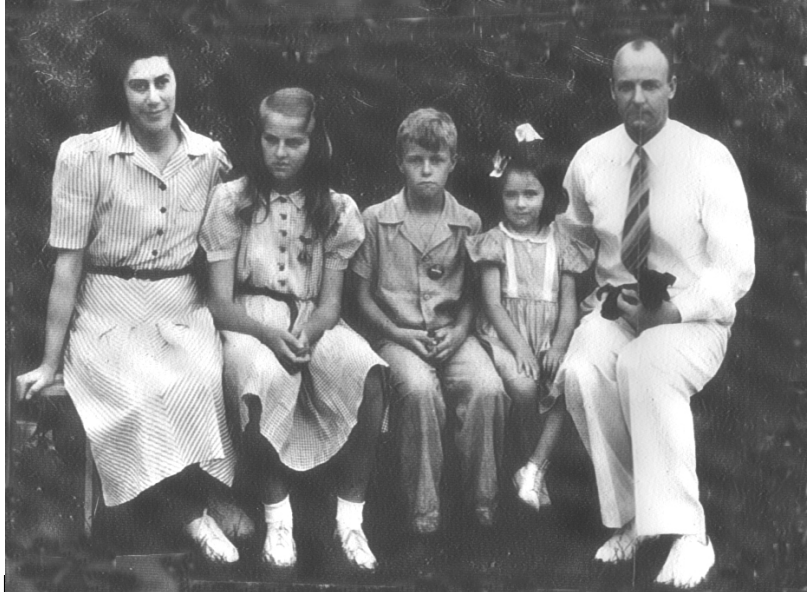
**Figure 3: Bill and Nellie on their wedding day**

The next morning, [she brought in] 12 to 15 in the lab... [Bill knew that] "live shrews are hard to get" but he found a collector who got them, though [she was] bitten. Bill said, "This is another natural history student, so I['d] better marry her." Nellie was "as rugged as he was." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006) [Is it any wonder then,] that when William J. Hamilton Jr. and Nellie Richtmyer were on the reception for the 1928 international Congress of Entomologists, they whispered to me that they were engaged?" (Albert and Anna Wright, DBB)

"Nellie was quite interested in seashells. She had a large shell collection [which she later donated the Paleological Research Institute]" (Howard Evans, 2006). In addition, Nellie Hamilton had a passion for collecting stamps. Professor Tom Eisner's father was also a collector. Tom reported, "His wife was a stamp collector as was my father. My father used to go over there and exchange stamps with her. One day he went over there and he met Bill Hamilton. So he came home that night for dinner and my dad said, "I met your colleague Wild Bill Hamilton". I said, "Oh." He said, "Yes, poor man". I said, "What you mean?" He said, "Well his leg...". I said, "What about his leg?" "Well, he told me that he lost it to a shark bite." So what happened, Bill Hamilton was taking a nap and he got up and he had a limp from not lying right. Then my father was introduced to him by Mrs. Hamilton. Then he asked, "What's the problem with your foot?" He said, "Shark bite". So he convinced my father that he had been attacked by a shark" (Tom Eisner, 2006).

Their first daughter, Ruth was born in 1929, followed by William III in 1931, who was known as young Bill. June, their youngest daughter, was born in 1937. As parents, Nellie and Bill would take their children to the lake to "watch the ducks and the like." Ruth remembered that as Hamilton children. We "were encouraged to collect everything. We had butterfly collections, we had soil collections...and stamp collections...We were encouraged but not forced into any kind of major study" (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, H.I.).

The Hamilton family would often vacation in Florida. Nellie heard a rumor that a manatee had been hit by a boat propeller and had died in the Bayou. She hired a skipper to take her to the carcass and brought along a saw and the kids. Ruth remembers that, as they approached the carcass, the stench was awful. Nellie sawed and sawed at the head until it was loose. At home she prepared the skull by boiling it and then sent it to the University to add to the collection. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)



**Figure 4: The Hamilton Family (From left to right): Nellie, Ruth, Young Bill, June and Bill.**

In 1940, while traveling with a few graduate students in swamps of Chincoteague, off the coast of Virginia, he received a phone call from Nellie. She had bought a house and he was to come home immediately. He hurried home to close the deal. The woman who was selling the house said that the house was going on the market on Sunday but that Nellie could buy it on Saturday and cut out the real estate fee.

“We [had] lived on Mitchell Street. We bought a house on the city line... It was nice and it was near the research I was doing in the fields. There were all open fields around there then...And the[re were large] population[s] of field mice, which I was doing ... studies on at the time. [It was] a wonderful opportunity to do this work.” (H.I.)

Nellie had found, “a great buy.” However, he later regretted the deal -- “I tell people now that if you’re interested in gardening and you’re planning to buy a house, don’t go in the house until you take a soil auger and test the ground, and see what sort of soil you’re getting. Because we bought an acre and a half of heavy clay, and I’ve been fighting it ever since.” (H.I.)

“Cayuga Heights, at one time, not too long ago, there were twenty and thirty acres – stretches – of hay fields, and goldenrod and asters and things of that sort. And here the population of field mice, which was one of my primary study subjects, was - were very abundant. Now, let me tell you, at the Bureau of Animal Populations at Oxford in England, in order to make the same sort of population studies I was making here, Charles Elton and his crew of twelve workers had to travel overnight by train to Northern England and Lower Scotland to get field study material in

One day while in the garden Professor Hamilton decided that he would take a stump out using his station wagon. Against the advice of his son he tied the stump to his bumper. As accelerated, the stump didn't move but the car did. As he looked at his driveway through the rearview mirror he saw an angry son and his bumper. (Bill Dilger, 2006)

natural areas. Whereas I could step out fifty feet from my back steps and be in the field, when I lived over on Mitchell Street, and over here... I was right in the midst of...hayfields -- that's where the field mice are. So I alone could do the work of six or seven crews and spend the time that they were traveling to and from their work. So this opportunity to deal in numbers, -- abundant individuals -- it was a unique one, I thought. And as a consequence, I wanted to carry on this work." (H.I.)

He came to know the property well and "knew the skunks within two hundred yards of his house. He knew them by name. He knew every woodchuck and where the woodchuck's holes were" (Verne Rockcastle, 2006).

The impermeable clay was the bane of his existence. In his usual way, Bill found a way around this problem. Each morning he would bring a burlap sack full of clay soil to the dumpsters on his way to work. And on the way back, he would bring all sorts of soils to cultivate plants in his gardens.

His grandson remembered the ingenuity with which he remedied this problem, "He drove [his] station wagon with the back seats folded down and a canvas tarp pulled over the back. He would drive to various locations to collect soil for different...[spots] in the garden. I suggested that he could haul more in a pickup truck but he said that a station wagon was more inconspicuous and that people were suspicious when they saw someone hauling off something in a pickup truck. He would trade in the station wagon every few years after a good cleaning. I don't believe he did any work on his cars, he commented to me one time while I was disassembling my 10-speed bike that it looked very complicated. He took me on soil collecting trips several times, once into the woods to collect woodland soil and I remember one time going to get chicken manure with him from a field next to the barns. I remember looking down at the pile of feathers, hay, and manure that we were shoveling into the back of the station wagon and asked why we were doing this and he started a long discourse on the wonderful properties of chicken manure." (Charlie Fisher, grandson, 2006)

"It was hard to get ahead of Bill. I caught him once though... The last time I came over as I often did... We were looking at plants and he had a station wagon and there were mushrooms growing in the back. He collected all kinds of stuff -- manure and sand and gravel and put that all in the back. He had all his tools and stuff there. I said to them, "Why don't you get a pickup truck? That's what you really need. Then you wouldn't have any trouble and Nelly wouldn't be on your butt about it." [He said,] "I wouldn't want the looks of one of those in the driveway." I said, "Well hell, I'll move mine right away then." He said, "Oh! No, no, no. Not you. That's alright. No, no, no. I didn't mean

If you caught him he'd get this funny look on his face. (Charles Smith, 2006)

He would go blank a little bit. (Bill Dilger, 2006)

Dr. Worth, an entomologist, recommended to Ruth that she buy a particular book on moths and butterflies. She bought the book at a bookstore on her way up to Ithaca from Princeton. She paid \$10 for an old, hardbound copy. Upon returning to Ithaca she showed it to her father and said, "Daddy look Dr. Worth recommended this book and I got it." He looked in the inside cover and said "Oh, darn you paid \$10! I would've sold you mine for \$2." (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

that.” It was hard to get him but I did.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

The Hamilton family would often have visiting houseguests at their home in Cayuga Heights. Bill would pour out a small amount of apple juice into a jar the night before and then say, “I’ve got to remember to get that urine sample to the doctor tomorrow morning.” Then he would set it out as if he was going to wrap it in cellophane or package it. He would then absentmindedly sip it. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

One time Bill was doing research on the skull formation of black bears. He decided to keep them in his basement. Early each morning, his children would rush down to open the cages where the young bears slept. Then they would rush upstairs ahead of the bears and jump up on the kitchen table from where they would bottle-feed the cubs. This continued until one day when a bear swatted June, his daughter, and caused bleeding. After that, they found a new home in a nature preserve. (June Hamilton, daughter, 2006)

His home was not only a place for visiting animals and friends but also for many relatives. Some of them have vivid recollections of their time there.

*My uncle Bill Hamilton was a great favorite of mine and my brother. Every holiday we met he was always the one adult who would actually address each of us and have something to say relevant to our young lives. Additionally he had a marvelous sense of humor, and anyone who makes a child laugh is destined to be a favorite relative forever. (Connie Greenspan, Niece, 2007)*

*Each visit seemed the same; we would pull the car into the driveway and carry our suitcases up the walk to the back door. There was a sign over the garage door that I always got a kick out of reading. It said something to the effect of “No Trespassin’, No Huntin, No Fishin, No Swimmin, Damn if I ain’t tired of all this Hell raisin on my Property, anyone caught will be prosecuted to the full extent of a 12 gauge shotgun and a mangy dog!” (Charles Fisher, grandson, 2006)*

*My earliest memories of my grandfather were of fishing. I vaguely remember going with him and wearing rubber boots; I distinctly remember the tug of the pole with the fish fighting back and then much later seeing the fish in a frying pan of grease on the stove top that morning. Years later I remember my grandmother scoffing at him for having taken me to the fish hatchery to fish in the tanks. (Charles Fisher, grandson, 2006)*

Did you really catch that big brown trout in Six Mile Creek, or was it one of George Embody’s breeders from the hatchery? ( Dwight A. Webster, DBB)
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*On another occasion he took me fishing at a gorge, I think it was off Lake Beebee. It was a secluded spot with a calm surface and walls of rock rimmed with hemlock trees, it was strikingly beautiful. I remember catching a sunfish and not being able to disengage the hook, I tried to jerk the hook out rather violently, my grandfather calmly took the fish and easily slipped the hook out and then admonished me saying that it was a small fish and should be treated gently. (Charles Fisher, grandson, 2006)*

*On one occasion I can remember my grandfather making blueberry pancakes on a Sunday morning. I think this was part of the routine for the family on the weekends. I was watching and asking a few questions about the pancakes when he told me about how he had been a chef on the Mauritania and that they had blueberries the size of golf balls. I had a funny feeling about this. (Charles Fisher, grandson, 2006)*

*When we were ready to leave and were packed up in the car he would always be waiting in the driveway. There would be a great commotion of shouts that he created as he directed us down the driveway imploring the driver not run over the valuable plants that lined the drive. Later I came to realize that the plant were nothing more than common (and hardy) day lilies. (Charles Fisher, grandson, 2006)*

His fellow neighborhood gardener remembered that when her daughter was about eight and on a family hike, she found a leg bone of an unknown ungulate. "We weren't sure what animal. Sheep? Goat? Deer? A day or two later...I suggested she bike up to Hamilton's...and ask him... As she pulled into his drive, he bellowed at her from across the yard, 'Who's that bringing me a femur of a deer this morning?'" (Nina Lambert, neighbor, 2006)

## 6. Cornell Professor

During the depression, from the 1930's to the 1940's, the salaries at the University were low and, "advancement was very slow." (H.I.) However, Hamilton was able to teach Wright's courses when he and Anna were on sabbaticals, "We were all lucky to have a job... We had to do; perhaps, more than we thought was our share. But sometimes when you are given a heavy load of teaching, you get more done in research and you make time to do it. And that was one way of getting advanced at Cornell, or any sizable University." (H.I.) Along with other professors, Hamilton maintained the status of instructor without being promoted to Assistant Professor for six to seven years.

In 1932, he was offered three positions, "All three in Michigan... they offered me a position at the University of Michigan - \$2,551 per year... Then I went on to East Lansing, to Michigan State, and they offered me \$3,000, which was more than some professors were getting here at the time. And it sounded pretty good. Then I went up to Lansing, from East Lansing, about five miles away; and I talked to the Conservation Department; and they said that they wanted me to come out, they wanted me on their staff, and I said, 'What will I do?' 'If we have someone calling in about muskrats in their goldfish pond, they wanted to send Dr. Hamilton out to investigate and advise them.' So when I asked the salary I was told, 'We can pay you \$3,600.' I replied, 'I wouldn't come for less than \$4,000.' With that the division chief slammed his hand down on the desk, and he said, 'That's as high as we'll go.' I just wonder to this day if I had said \$5,000..." (H.I.) Before accepting these positions, Hamilton received an urgent message that his son was sick and needed to come back home as soon as possible. By the time he had returned home, young Bill had recovered. Despite the Michigan offers, Hamilton stayed at Cornell because he knew that if he was offered permanency, he would be able to do research and publish, "I was in love with Cornell and I thought it was wonderful." (H.I.)

"You don't have the opportunity for research in many institutions. They frown on it or they give one little time to do it. I knew I had a rare opportunity here. I knew I could get a lot accomplished in that fashion, even though I had a heavy teaching load – four labs a week and Saturday morning, taught two lectures, doing the work of my chief. And I worked hard – I wanted to stay at Cornell." (H.I.)

After returning home to Cornell, Hamilton was given a raise and soon promoted to Assistant Professor. Bill Hamilton, Albert Wright, Arthur Allen and James Needham continued to be employed by the Department of Entomology and Limnology until the post-war years. Hamilton and the other Ag Zoologists were paid by the State School but housed in the Arts Campus, "It was particularly hard for several of us...to honor the lower campus and [hold] appointment[s] in both departments, but were taken care of by neither." (H.I.) "We were simply not recognized as members of the faculty in the upper campus. And we were left to so-called rot down here -- on the lower [campus]..." (H.I.) "The Arts people looked down on the upper

Early each morning on the way to work, Hamilton would bring a bushel of cow patties and throw them on the cleanly manicured lawns and quads. The grounds crews were boggled to no end. (Unknown Source)
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campus as a bunch of dairymen or melon raisers. And they wanted no part of them... And even the visiting football teams thought of the College as an Ag School entirely, because many of the players came from the Ag School...I think these [Arts] people...resented this and as a consequence there was always a difference of opinion and a difference of views between the two. (H.I.)

Up in Fernow Hall, there was a Department of Forestry, "There was no point in having two schools of Forestry in one state. In fact, there was no place for more than two or three schools of forestry in the whole country, because there were no openings for graduates. As a consequence it was decided that all of the forestry would go to Syracuse. And so then they said, "We'll have to substitute something. We had this building here and will have to substitute something." Conservation was taking quite a bit of interest at the time. That was back in 1946. "All right, we'll have a Department of Conservation." That was established finally in 1947. We just moved from McGraw Hall to Stimson, getting a little closer all the time to the upper campus. In 1947, after World War II, we all got in a few trucks together with our belongings and went up to Fernow Hall. The Department was established as an amalgamation of Fishery Biology, Vertebrate Zoology, Forestry and that, in essence, was the nucleus of the new Department of Conservation." (H.I.)

This move satisfied Hamilton, "We were through with all of them. We were through with Entomology, we were through with the Arts campus, and we had our own department... Some of us were pleased with the title of the Department, but I didn't [like it because it didn't] indicate [us as] zoologists in the Department. Nevertheless, the letterhead included vertebrate zoology and we accepted that, and we were happy to see that. We got more support that way [from the State and the Department of Environmental Conservation], and we were in the middle of the Ag campus in Fernow Hall. So that was a good move for many of us." (H.I.)

"Those were days when Professor knew each other." (Howard Evans, 2006)

Gus Swanson was hired to chair the department, (it was around this time that Wright had retired). He pulled together a stellar faculty; Arthur Allen – birds, Ed Raney – fishes, Bill Hamilton – mammals, Bob Eadie – wildlife management, and Ced Guise – forestry management - "That was the nucleus" (H.I.). "Doug Payne was a technician and when they moved there it was actually Hamilton who was influential in taking Doug Payne to Fernow Hall. Doug Payne was a very interesting guy... His father was electrocuted. He worked for the gas and electric company. He was electrocuted on a high voltage line so Doug had to drop out of college. Ben Young, who was the chairman of Zoology, hired Payne to be the technician of zoology. He was an electrical engineer and didn't know anything about zoology but he ended up learning how to do everything – embalm the cats, inject the necturids, open the clams. When the time [came] to found the Conservation Department in Fernow Hall, Doug Payne was only too glad go with Hamilton and Raney. He did all the photographic work for the professors." (Howard Evans, 2006)

One of the greatest tributes to the Cornell Natural History Program and to you specifically is that all-around zoologists, interested in mammals, herps, plants etc., persist across the country." (Frederick R. Gehlbach, DBB)

“There was a substantial dynamic here that grew from the fact that we have the vertebrate groups – fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals -and we had people in this department. We have faculty in this department addressing each of those groups in a very substantial way. These people were leaders in their field. [Ollie] Hewitt stood very tall among wildlife science professionals. Hamilton was certainly a lead person in mammalogy. Ed Raney; virtually anyone and everyone who has worked on or thought about a fish has come across Raney's name or a citation that has come from his work.”(Mike Richmond, 2006)

“You can imagine them as giant wolf trees in a forest... [There were other] people who were out there doing things but [they] were often dwarf shrubs or tall skinny trees or with minimal growth potential. [However, the founding members of the department] were the giants of the forest - the giant seed trees that proliferated [and] caused everything to grow. It's kind of a weird analogy I suppose but there were many limbs - many aspects to these people - and lots of healthy growth from the work they did.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)



## 7. Fellow Professors

*A giant might develop on its own but I think that if you get multiple significant giants in their professions coming together during the same time, during the same period of productive life there is an accentuated grow for all of them because of the system that they create which causes the climate of research and discovery and competition for doing better, for doing more and the bar was set high because you look around and you find good people all around you - high quality research. Teachers people who never thought about their role as a job. They thought about it as a hobby and a way of life.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)*

### ALBERT HAZEN WRIGHT

“[Albert Hazen] Wright was a Normal School man and a Normal School teacher [for a] year or two before he came on to Cornell” (H.I.) (A Normal School in an institution for training teachers) “He was a rare one - A fine field naturalist. So many are born to the love of nature and he came under the tutelage of his Normal School teachers, who were very proficient in the field, and inspired him to come to Cornell.” (H.I.) He came to Cornell around 1906 to study roses and irises.” (Howard Evans, 2006) “He was interested in geneology [of] plants [and] became an authority on dwarf iris... Wright took all his undergraduate and graduate work at Cornell” (H.I.) Soon thereafter he was taken with reptiles and amphibians and became one of the nations leading herpetologists (a person who studies the aforementioned animals). As a professor of Zoology, he was known for his “frog book and snake book.” (Howard Evans, 2006) Professor Wright was known warmly by his students as ‘Uncle Bert’. (Allen Benton, 2006) “[Wright] was given a staff position as on instructor and stayed on until [his death].” (H.I.)

“At that time Fernow had a faculty in vertebrate zoology that was distinguished.”  
(Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

As his graduate assistant, Bill recalled that “He digressed so much that on the field trips where I would accompany him with the classes he would sometimes stop at a historical marker and spend the better part of the lab period discussing the history of – for instance, the Sullivan Expedition to this area during the Revolution. And as a consequence, we never got much accomplished that we had planned to on the field trips. And I had to make up the time somehow later with the class.” (H.I.)

Always on the go, “He never moved, except for a trot.” (Allen Benton, 2006)

“When he was young, he went on field trips with other students of similar classes, and there he met Arthur [A.] Allen’s sister, Anna Allen, and then he became enamored and married... [They were] a great one and he and Mrs. Allen. Mrs. Allen went on all his research trips, and she did all the driving and she took all the photographs. She was fearless. She would hold the rattlesnakes in one hand and take the pictures with the other.” (H.I.)

“They were childless, but they did adopt six children of a distant relative, and they nursed them through school and through college here. He and Professor Karl. M. Wiegand, who was the Professor of Botany at the time, were neighbors; and they took six of the children – they adopted three each – and raised them. (H.I.)

He was rigorous as an instructor, expecting extreme proficiency in natural history, “I remember in Conservation 8... A.H. Wright was the professor then. Well, you’d come in for an exam and there were white [enamel] trays with lizards stuck in them. You’d think to yourself, “I know what they are.” Then you’d read the question and it said, “They were all collected in the same

place. Where was it?” Oh my god! Like the southeast corner of Wester County, South Dakota, the only place where you would find three of them, let alone all six. You’ve got to know your stuff”(Bill Dilger, 2006)

### **No Bullfrogs in Ithaca in February**

When the first vinyl recordings of amphibians came out, Professor Hamilton and several other professors brought a portable phonograph player to A.H. Wrights house in the middle of winter. At two a.m. they started playing the sound of the bullfrog. Wright woke up, got out of bed, opened the window and indignantly shouted out “There are no bullfrogs in Ithaca in February” and he slammed the window shut.

Alternately; Wright bellowed, “Hamilton get yourself outta here and take that damn thing with you.” (Nina Lambert, 2006)

Alternately; Wright shouted out, “Hamilton shut that off and get out of here.”(Bill Dilger, 2006)

### **ARTHUR ALLEN**

*[Arthur Allen] had the same type of extensive firsthand knowledge of birds -- birds in the hand, dissected birds, birds on the nest (Verne Rockcastle, 2006).*

“Allen was reasonably aggressive in a very nice way, pushing himself, and pushing ornithology. And Cornell was noted for ornithology in the early days before the other factors and fields in zoology, because it was a popular interest even then. And so he was recognized, but the others weren't.” (H.I.)

Allen would lead overnight field trips to Danby, Dryden or other neighboring towns during the week. The class would leave around one p.m. and walk to the field site. Along the way the Allen would teach about the things that they were passing. The class would then sleep out, wake up early the next morning, and then return to Cornell in time for the 8 a.m. courses. (Bill Dilger, 2006)

### **CHARLES SIBLEY**

If there was one person who was wholesomely despised by the Conservation Department, whose name is mentioned with indifference and coldness, it would be Charles Sibley. Sibley came to Cornell in the 1950’s when Arthur Allen retired. He did early phylogenetic work using electrophoresis and later DNA. He told his graduate students that they all were on strings and that he held the scissors (Bill Dilger, 2006). He

was “rather humorless” (Charles Smith, 2006). He didn’t like “squeaky shoes or people whistling.” (Bill Dilger, 2006) All in all, he was a “thoroughly unlovely person” (Bill Dilger, 2006).

“Sibley was becoming unpopular to the extent that no one would sit and have lunch with him... and Dilger, who was a very capable artist and the curator of the bird collection at the time was sitting working in his office”(Charles Smith, 2006). “He would never knock when he walked in...He sat down and said, “You’ve got to make up your mind!” ‘About what Chuck?’ - He didn’t like that at all. ‘Well are you going to be an artist or a scientist? You can’t be both.’... He thought I was going to say Sutton or Fuertes, so I said, ‘Oh, I don’t think that’s true. I think you can be a scientist and an artist.’ ‘No you can’t. Name me one.’ I said, “Leonardo da Vinci.” He got all red in the face and slammed the door.”

## BOB EADIE

“[Economic Conservation] was really further developed by Bob Eadie... It was the forerunner of the wildlife damage management efforts that have been so widespread in recent years. He made the case for mammals and other animals of beneficial value or of pest proportions -- overabundant populations... He talked about the pluses and minuses -- economics impacts of species. He was the one of the first to get into that subject area and teach about it. I think that was because he developed the course here in the Ag College and there was a great deal of interest in the storage of grain and the prevention of wildlife damage to crops and impacts on farmers and people who are attempting to make a living and are having trouble with mammal species as well as birds back then. From the point of view of all of the vertebrate species he was the first to point out the beneficial aspects or the negative aspects” (Mike Richmond, 2006).

“I did a life history of the northern pine mouse. I think they call it the woodland mouse now... It was [Bob] Eadie who got me started in the right place. He was working with an orchardist who was overrun with pine mice. He got me an entrée to study down there in that orchard... where I could trap and mark twenty in a single night. He was the extension biologist” (Allen Benton, 2006).

## PERRY GILBERT

“Bill was very likable. He had a good sense of humor... He and Perry Gilbert would kid each other. Bill would get on the phone and say that it was Edmund Ezra Day and that he wanted to see him. So Perry went over there and he found out it was a joke. Then less than a year later Day did call him and he picked up the phone and said, “This is Ezra Day calling.” Perry replied, “The hell you are!” [It was only later that] Day found out and they had a good laugh over that” (Samuel Leonard, 2006).

## ED RANEY

“A.H. Wright was a real field person. Raney was the same way. Wright hired Raney - Raney was a math teacher in a high school in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania” (Howard Evans, 2006)

“The one teaching fisheries biology [Ed Raney] did the same thing with fishes that Hamilton did with mammals.”  
(Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

“Charlotte and I have a vivid memory of a cold night in late November of 1935. We found you in the laboratory of the top floor of McGraw Hall taking data on field mice as you weighed and opened each specimen. As a result of our conversation that night, ...we decided to come back to Cornell. I have never regretted that decision.

(Edward C. Raney, DBB)

“He had an office next to Ed Raney in Stimson Hall, and they would yell back and forth to each other, but their voices had to go around the doorway.” (Howard Evans, 2006)

### **Killer Entomologist**

Do you remember the one that I fell for on our first meeting in your office in the summer of 1947? Several months had elapsed since the mysterious disappearance of a certain entomologist at Penn State. You “informed” me that he had just been found working in a barbershop in Trumansburg, that he had gone berserk and slit the throats of five customers. Since reports indicated that he was heading for Stimson Hall, you feared that he was planning to do the same thing to all of his old friends, like A.H. Wright, and you had better keep your door locked for protection! You even got Ed Raney in on the act. Man, what a yarn that was! (Ralph W. Yerger, DBB)

“Robert Rocher’s degree was under Hamilton on the gray squirrel [which came] after being fired by Raney. He was a graduate

### **Impersonating the Dean**

One day when Hamilton knew a fellow professor was away from his desk. He hustled into the office and quickly asked the secretary if the professor was there. She replied that he was out but asked if there was anything that she could do. He told her that it was Dean Henry? and that he needed to see him urgently. When the professor returned, the secretary relayed the message. He ran to the dean’s office, burst into his room and said, “You needed to see me sir”. “Well no”, the dean replied.  
(Unknown source)

student of Raney’s in ichthyology and Raney took him on a southern expedition. I was along on it. He used to go on expeditions every year all the way down to Georgia and you would stop at each bridge across to where there was a creek. You take the seine haul in the creek venue to preserve the stuff into quart jars full of formaldehyde. When you would fill the whole box of 2-quart jars you’d go to the next railroad station where he had sent ahead formaldehyde and cheesecloth in a great big milk can. He would send him to a rail junction and we would stop at a rail junction. We would spill out the quart jars into the milk can and ship that back to Ithaca. There would be new formalin in the can. It was quite an organized thing and Raney did this every year. That’s how we have such a

great minnow collection from the entire East Coast all the way down to Florida because every spring he would take three graduate students. So it was Sutkus, Rocher and I. Rocher was a little clumsy and by the second or third time he had fumbled things around, Raney couldn't take it. By the time he came back Raney was so mad that he had to switch his graduate thesis advisor to Hamilton" (Howard Evans, 2006).

## 8. Teaching

*“Your ability to make naïve students aware of the biological importance of the commonplace...broods of bluebirds or road-killed opossums all speak of this basic requisite of a good biologist and teacher – love of life.”* (Stephen W. Eaton, DBB)

“Your stupid puns in class, over which you made a big, chortling fuss, and your straight-faced, really good jokes which you slid over so that only the close listeners got them. The sick ones about goats that had to keep running in the high country so they got browse enough to live, and the good ones poking fun at pomposity in the literature.” (Derek Petitt, DBB)

“I retain a clear picture of the tall, cigar-smoking instructor with the subtle sense of humor and capacity for confusing naïve students.” (Ed Raney, DBB)
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“Now, we're taken a different slant, and turning back, perhaps, to the old field, but... You see, we are unique -- Cornell is -- many ways, particularly in the field biology because we can get in the field five minutes from any building on campus for research. And with a city school, such as New Haven, Cambridge, or Philadelphia, or any of those, they have to take a bus or their cars and travel sometimes an hour's distance from their respective campuses to get into areas that were suitable for field studies.” (H.I.)

”I used to tell a lot of stories, too, some of them I made up. To get them to laugh if I could. You know, sometimes you see someone talking and the audience pays no attention, but if one goes up the side of the room and pulls up the shade – every eye is on him, watching that shade go up. And then back to sleep... The trouble with so many people is that they talk to the blackboard, and they mumble. And they don't look at the audience at all.” (H.I.)

Hamilton had a rather poor memory but he made an effort to know every student. He would have Douglas Payne, the lab technician, take their pictures and put them on the cards with their names. In this way, he got to know his students before the semester got well underway. (H.I.)

## 9. Undergraduate Testing

Hamilton's tests were technically difficult. He expected his students to know the animals they were working with thoroughly. This extreme left its impact on a few students:

"I recall my Vertebrate Zoology and Mammalogy days at Cornell; your spot quizzes (half mouse half bat combination, and crushed bone fragments), your pseudo-swallowing of tadpoles, and your exceptional ability to pull the legs of gullible students." (Heinz K. Meng, DBB)

"This query was dispelled by the first lab practical on crushed skulls, scatological remnants, bits of hair, and snap-trap victims." (Howard Evans, DBB)

One time Professor Hamilton was giving a final exam in a course and he brought with him a sack of bones. He spread them out on the table and said, "They all have numbers on them, you've got to tell me what animals they came from and what part of that animal." In this way Hamilton was able to find out who truly knew the animals they were studying. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

If he felt that the students were placing too much emphasis on a trait particular to the specimen, either the individual or how it was prepared, he would call students in for a 'spot-quiz'.

One vivid recollection is of learning the hard way that I wasn't giving proper attention to variation and to specific characteristics in identifying animals. When the time for a quiz came around, you called me into your office and asked me to name a group of five fresh specimens of what seemed to me to be minute size. They had their identifying characteristics, all right, but I had been putting too much faith in some features which belonged only to adults. I don't recall now how many I got right, but I do know that I learned a valuable lesson. (Frederick H. Test, DBB)

In 1932-1933, when I was trying to run down picked teleosts and stuffed mice with Jordan's Manual in the far reaches of McGraw. At that time, you were examining the stomach contents of various rodents, but would look up from you microscope with a mischievous grin and tell us in no uncertain terms how far off the track we were. (Bob Schaeffer, DBB)

On this occasion I should say that the spot quiz you gave me once in Course 8 was unforgivable... the type of quiz where you called students up to identify pickled fish in a lab pan. You gave me ten different fallfish specimens in a row...on the ninth my nerve cracked and I called it a "shiner." Your only comment, "I guess you'll recognize a fall fish from now on." (Dwight Webster, DBB)

## 10. Undergraduate Advising & the Open Door Policy

*"Each time I knocked on your office door, you would bellow, "C'mon in!" Never did you decline a visit, but always took time to share some tidbits from your vast store of facts, know-how and human relations."* (Verne N. Rockcastle, DBB)

For many students, it was in his office that they could meet the *real* Hamilton. It was here that he would offer advice and counsel.

Any student who wanted to come up and chew the fat was welcomed.

"I liked him. He was a likable man. He always had time to talk about things...He took time to talk to people. He was always very helpful." (Mike Richmond, 2006)

"There were so many good men

and fine teachers. They kept open house. Unlike some of the young assistant professors today who have office hours of 11 to 12 Friday only -- 1 hour a week. And so I learned through them to always keep an open door, and let anyone come in into the fat -- the students -- and talk to them and discuss their problems. So that was it. (H.I.)

He would often have a microscope on his desk looking at the stomach contents of various animals.

"A knock on your office door would... elicit that familiar "whoop" in response." (William Z. Lidicker, DBB)

### **Mushroom Poisoning**

Hamilton would be sitting in his office with a small mushroom sitting on his desk. Across from him would be an undergraduate student to whom he would say, "I just love eating these mushrooms. I've loved eating them all my life - ever since I was a little kid. Now these ones are a little bit late for the year but I think this just because the rains came a few weeks later." He would then pop the mushroom in his mouth and eat it. "These ones are a bit fruitier than usual, but pretty good actually." Hamilton would then slowly slumped in his chair and fall to the floor. The terrified students would run out of the room screaming, "There's a professor that has just eaten a poison mushroom quick someone call an ambulance!" A few minutes later a student would return with an EMT only to find Professor Hamilton working away at his desk. (Harrison Ambrose, 2006)

"He was always doing something that involved practical jokes. He was keeping things light and at the same time he was teaching you something." (Allen Benton, 2006)

"Certainly one of my more precious moments in life was brought to reality on a day when I visited you at Fernow Hall and saw your laboratory, library, desk and all the other things in the ecology of William Hamilton. Things that had been legend to me from fellow students were then brought into sharp focus and all the tales and stories of William Hamilton. Things that had been legend to me from fellow students were then brought into sharp focus and all the tales and stories of William Hamilton, the scholar, the teacher, the prankster, and the man, were made particularly clear during our long pleasant conversation. (Philip H. Krutzsch, DBB)



To his credit, he helped inspire a new generation of scientists. He touched their lives... *"It was some 35 years ago when I was a tall and awkward kid with a deep desire to devote my future life to the study of biology. My interest in these matters did not add to my popularity...and thus contributed to a certain sense of loneliness and wonderment about my deep and possibly bizarre interests in animals which set me apart from the common herd."*

*It was at that time that one day I went to the top floor of Roberts Hall with a few of my prize insect specimens. I was looking at the display cases trying to identify them when a tall man stopped, took obvious interest in my search and asked me to step into his office. For the first time I talked to a 'professional' who not only was interested in what I was doing but also fired my imagination with the various problems he was tackling. He told me to call him Bill and from that time on I knew I had a friend whom I could always find on Saturdays, someone who encouraged my collecting and someone who had time to tell me some new and interesting yarn, true or imagined.*

*While you have probably forgotten this early incident, it had a very important influence upon my future professional development. As I look back upon it, it was this association that gave me the courage and conviction to go into biology as a career. When my own friends could not understand why I wanted to spend my life studying such 'queer things', I knew that Bill did and that was all I needed."* (Hermann Rahn, DBB)

### **Downing Formalin**

"Down in Stimson Hall, the only thing that Hamilton had in his office was a big sink which was all he needed because for mammalogist who was interested in field things he was always opening up fresh animals and needed to rinse them out." (Howard Evans, 2006) "He was taking off parasites and putting them in a jar." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006) Evidently what happened was he had a beaker with some formalin that he mixed up to preserve some things and he started coughing so he went over to the sink to take a drink and he picked up the beaker with formalin and drank it. The minute he did it he realized what he had done and he flushed out his mouth and went over to Ed next door and said, "I just drank half a glass of formalin by mistake. I think you'd better get me to the hospital. Raney took him to the hospital and in the hospital they give a lot of fluid to drink." (Howard Evans, 2006) "They rushed to the hospital where Hamilton's stomach was pumped. The doctors did not expect him to live through the night. He spent the next few weeks in an oxygen tent in a hospital, recovering from this near-death experience." (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006) "He had burned tissue in his esophagus." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006) "People wondered how we did it but the fact was he has a sink right there in the office and he was very careless about what he put in what container – in cups and glasses. He was impetuous, he did things right away. He didn't think about it" (Howard Evans, 2006).

### **ENCOURAGEMENT TO STRUGGLING STUDENTS**

"I have the feeling that you still wouldn't mind dispensing your good advice and encouragement to hold a man on the right track." (C.H. Wharton, DBB)

“I would tell them, if they ever have a question, my door is open. Come upstairs and talk. So they would come in frequently, and I'd bellow out, if they knocked on the door, "Come in!" Sometimes we'd get an aggressive one that knew the answers and you couldn't tell them anything, so we just let them talk on and never bother to interrupt him. But it was largely a question of letting -- letting them come up and chew the fat with us. (H.I.)

“If a student was doing poorly, I'd tell them, tell them in the best way that I could that he had to get on the ball. We had Dave [David] Allen, Arthur Allen's son, the bird man, who was a fine student, but he did poorly in classes because he missed so many of them. He'd be hunting or doing something else. And we'd have an awful time getting him through school. Two of us worked on him, cajoled him, threatened him, did everything under the sun, but we got him through. But we had to work on him.”

(H.I.)

#### WOMEN ADVISEES

I used to make all my students take comparative anatomy, which is entirely laboratory work; histology, which is the study of tissues; and other courses in conjunction with field biology. Two is essential. The best training for many of these biological students is a pre-medical course because they can't shun some of the important courses that they have to take, such as organic chemistry, if they sign up for that. I used to make all my students – my girl advisees – take a course in histology and bacteriology and they couldn't understand why, but I would tell them why. That if you have these two courses behind you and do well in it, you're certain to get a job. Almost a certainty – a good job – in a hospital or in a clinic. In the event you don't get married, here – or even if you do – here's an opening for you. And many of them – a great many of them didn't end up in the field because of those two courses they hadn't taken. They were tough courses at the time, six hours each. But they took them and they did well because of that. Many of my students had planned to go into the field of natural history. I insisted on them taking a largely pre-medical course, and as a consequence, a lot of them went into medicine. (H.I.)

“I used to insist all my girl advisees take courses in bacteriology and histology, [in] which you learned how to make slides, tissue slides, and use a microscope. And I never had difficulty placing them – as a lab technician – which paid as well as teaching, and was more exciting and more fun.” (H.I.)

While reading Hamilton's words about his female advisees we should remember that he was teaching during the 1930's – 1960's. This does not excuse his chauvinist comments, but it contextualizes them.

## 11. Graduate Students

Hamilton was on the committee of one hundred and fifty graduate students - a tremendous number. He was the chair of 60 of them. On average, over his career as a professor, he took on five new graduate students a year, two of whom he was directly responsible for. The wealth of knowledge I have encountered about Hamilton is from these students with whom he formed an everlasting bond.

## 12. First Encounters

First impressions can have lasting impacts, and it was this first encounter which stayed with his student's years later.

Verne Rockcastle first met Hamilton as an entering grad student, "I came here in 1956 to do my Ph.D. and Bill Hamilton was one of my three committee members... When I first went to see him I asked if he would serve on my committee." Verne expected to talk about courses, research questions, and how to go about a literature review. Instead Professor Hamilton asked him, "Verne, do you have a car?" He replied that he did. "Your first assignment is to go out to Eva Gordon's house...and bring me back some of her daylilies." (Eva Gordon was his committee chairperson). Verne couldn't understand this request. "I was brand-new here I thought to myself what the heck is Cornell composed of?" (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

When Harlan Brumsted first met professor Hamilton, Bill asked him, "Would you like a cigar?" Harlan said "No." Quickly Hamilton replied, "If you said 'No thank you, I have one,' I would have asked you, 'Do you have two?'" (Harlan Brumsted, 2006)

### 13. Graduate Advising

Hamilton cared about his students and his students felt it. He was beloved by his students and was able to train generations of scientists. There was an integrity to the man that his students recognized and admired. Underneath all that good humor lay a teacher who cared not only about his students but about the importance of their subject.

*"I wanted only to keep close in touch with the students, and not talk down to them. And always have the door open for them." (H.I.)*

"I never had the advantage, Bill, of studying directly under you, [even so,] you have been generous with your time and counsel whenever I need of them, and I have profited much from our association. So many workers in the field to take themselves so seriously, it is refreshing to know you as one overshadows the rest, professionally, but is not above letting his hair down and acting human." (Richard H. Manville, DBB)

"So I have been thinking about... your influence on rosy-cheeked, eager young graduate students who had never before smoked cigar butts..." (Lamont Cole, DBB)

"Of the many things he taught me, perhaps, three stand out in my mind: first, the necessity of learning one's own abilities and limitations and striving to work [within] that limit; second, the absolute necessity of accuracy and scientific scholarship, both in investigation and reporting of the investigation; finally, the wisdom of keeping research techniques as simple as possible." (William E. Werner Jr., DBB)

"I came to appreciate the disciplines and needs for honesty in science, for when all kidding was done, these things formed the code you lived by, and thus they must be imported; for you, and a very few like you, I came to understand the reason why man seeks knowledge -- and why the teacher. (Lyle M. Thorp, DBB)

Hamilton was an advisor who was constantly "...cutting red tape, binding theses [and] writing countless letters" (C.H. Wharton, DBB)

"The time you discovered I hadn't had comparative anatomy and looked as if you had discovered an impostor among your grad students minoring in Mammalogy." (Derek Petitt, DBB)

He was an excellent storyteller. He could convince anybody of almost anything. One of the things I learned about dealing with him as a graduate student... The way I learned to deal with him was not to ask him anything serious if there was anybody else around -- that just wasn't the way to do it. If you wanted him to be serious, you went to his office and I could always get a straight answer out of him. I'd go in and he'd come forth with a joke. I'd snicker at it and then we go on with business." (John Whitaker, 2006)

“There was another graduate student there who couldn't ever get anything out of him because he tried to top him in jokes and he couldn't do it. Well, I don't think anyone could but anyway, he never got very far” (John Whitaker, 2006)

“I used to tell my graduate students, who were preparing to give their ten-minute talk at the scientific meeting, you were allowed ten minutes or twelve minutes, and many talked overtime and they should practice. So I said, “These three things you must remember in giving a talk. Stand up. Speak up. Shut up. And the last, particularly, is important.” There are more people who are pleased to hear the “In conclusion,” those two words they like to hear. Particularly if someone has rambled on for hours.” (H.I.)

“For people who never knew him, it's hard to appreciate that he was masterful at telling stories and fooling people... By that, I mean, he had a very gruff exterior. He had a bullhorn of a voice, and he was very forceful when he spoke. He'd come right up and say [to you], “You know what we ought to do!” This would immediately get somebody's attention. And if you didn't know him, he would totally overwhelm you with the presence of his voice... and [his] strength... He would never laugh at his own jokes. He was totally serious. Even if you knew [him you'd] be a little bit worried because he did it so well. He was just masterful at this whole routine. You believed him, no matter what the gimmick and what the routine. He had a forceful manner and a forceful voice and it all worked well.” (Peter Marks, 2006)

“He could string you along like that if you didn't know him or if you didn't know well the subject that he brought up and he sensed that. He would string you along for quite a while” (Charlie Smith, 2006)

“I think that he could look at a person and in 30 seconds or less could determine whether or not he could tell them a funny story and not hurt their feelings or embarrass them. He was tactful that way. He was guarded about how he did stuff. He wasn't just foolish about it. I like the humorous little bits that he used. I think it's also one of the things that made him a good teacher. He was willing to reveal things about himself and funny stories.”(Mike Richmond, 2006)

We had a mammal meeting at the Yellowstone Park, an outdoor meeting, and we'd meet once a year, the Mammal Society, and I was president at the time of – of the society – and the first program – the first morning, the president always presided as chairman. And this girl came up to present her paper and she was scared to death. She had never talked before, and started to tremble, and I thought she was going to pass out. And I remember so well going up to her and putting my arm on her shoulder and talking to the audience. “Every time I lecture to my classes now, I'm so nervous I feel I'm going to faint. My hands perspire...” I was making this up, but they didn't know it. “And that's the way with all of us, so we're all one family here, and we're talking to one another, and we may all be nervous, I know you are. I certainly am. We're going to hear this talk, we came to hear your talk, and you're going to talk to us informally, and we're going to love to hear it.” And then she braced up and gave the talk. She writes to me fairly frequently now. She never forgot it. But sometimes you have to just play on their emotions and try to

make them feel a little more at home.” (H.I.).

For all his humor and grandiosity, he had his insecurities. “He was very insecure but he did not act that way. He acted like that he was at the top of the world. I had a little insight when I left Cornell to get a job and I wanted to say goodbye for all his kindness and his classes. He said, “I want you to paint me a picture.” I said, “What do you want?” He said, “I want a robin in winter plumage.” I said okay. He said, “You’ll say okay and then you’ll go away and forget all about it.” I said, “No I won’t.” “Well that’s what you say now!” He said, “I’ve been teaching here at Cornell for about thirty years. When you get there and you’re teaching in front of your first class, just imagine that they are naked wearing just socks and you won’t feel bad.” You see, that must have been what he does or something - you know. It gave me a little insight into him.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

I took his mammalogy course. Afterwards I was talking to him and he said that a woman had called him up the day before and she had an opossum. In those days they were very, very rare around here. When [Louis] Fuertes painted the mammals for the National Geographic, he couldn’t get one. He had to get one from down south somewhere. Now they are up to southern Canada. So I asked him if I could see it. I wanted to make some sketches or something. He said, “Oh, sure.” And he stuck it in a burlap bag and gives it to me. So I took it up to Fernow and put it in a cage. It’s the dumbest animal on earth... It just sits there and kind of drools... So I did some sketches and it just sort of lived there for a while... Then I came in one morning and somebody said that he was trying to get a hold of me. So I called him. [He said,] “One of Perry Gilbert’s students is interested in opossums. Could you bring that opossum back?” I said, “Sure.” So I took it back in the bag he gave it to me in and I took it all the way back down from Fernow to Stimson [down Tower Road]. So I brought it in and said, “Well, here’s your opossum.” “He said, “How much does it weigh?” I said, “I don’t know, about 4 pounds, maybe 5 pounds.” He told me some number... then he weighed it on a spring-balance and that’s [exactly] what it was. So I gave him the bag and he was sitting behind his desk and with the bag in his lap. Well, it’s still a wild animal and it has more teeth than anything else around here. I wasn’t going to tell a mammalogy professor to be careful. So I was a little bit concerned about this. He said, “It is a male or a female?” I said, “It’s a female.” “Well, how do you know?” It has a marsupium. [He said,] “What’s that?” You see he was always teaching. He said, “Is it a virgin or not?” I thought he was getting a little wild here. I said that I had no idea. He said, “Damn, damn...” All of a sudden he froze and... his hand was trickling [blood] a little bit. He said, “Here, take it.” So I took it back up to Fernow Hall. So in the morning I came back to work and there was a call... It was Dr. Hamilton. He said, “Get that opossum down here.” I said, “What’s the matter?” He said, “That bite got me thinking. I’m kind of worried about the bite.” I said, “Oh, don’t worry. I looked at her a minute ago. She’s just fine.” “Now get it down here!”... There was no possibility of rabies because we had it so long. But he was always concerned about things. Got him a little bit there and it was great.

## 14. Suggesting Thesis Topics

Hamilton was an advocate for the common animal. While others would search out exotic animals in remote places to study, Hamilton believed there was a treasure trove of material to study right under his nose. He guided his students to look around them and learn about the animals in the area and in their habits. A chipmunk became more important than a white rat and a squirrel could become a more interesting subject to him than a man.

“I’m glad to give them such advice as I can. But I point out other subjects and I tell them the story of one of my colleagues – one of my graduate students in the field of conservation. When we first went to Fernow, there were quite a few bird people, and I talked to one – Joe Howell, he was a Southerner – and I said, “What are you going to work on Joe?” And he said, “I’m going to work on the wood duck, the biology of the wood duck.” I said, “Well, Joe, there are no wood ducks. They’re very scarce.” Now, this is about 1949, let’s see when it was, I think about 1950. “There are no wood ducks around here.” “Well, I’ll work in Florida.” I said, “Well, that’s one thing to work in Florida, but they’re scarce. All but eliminated in some of the states.” Now they’ve come back. Joe asked, “What would you suggest I work on?” “Why don’t you work on the robin? It’s a common bird. Lots of them. You could get wonderful material. And I’m certain that it wasn’t been fully explored. No bird has been.” And he laughed. He thought it was funny. Later it got back to me from the other graduate students that he had gone to see Hamilton and he told him to work on the robin, and they all laughed and he had thought it was funny. Well, I didn’t see him again for two years. And I thought he was in Florida studying the wood duck. Finally, he came in one day and I said, “Hi, Joe. How are you doing now? I haven’t seen you. Where have you been?” “Well, I dropped out of school for a couple of years, but I’m back here now and I’m going to study again.” “And what are you working on, the wood duck?” “Oh, no.” “What are you working on?” Well, you can guess – the robin. And he did a fine thesis on the robin, because it was common. He could deal in quantity and a long season of study and he made a real contribution. (H.I.)

“It doesn't seem so very long ago that you found a bottle of pickled, pregnant field mice on your shelf and suggested that I go out and catch some more of these in order to study the changes in the pubic symphysis during pregnancy as my introduction to research. One of the important lessons that I cared away from my early association with you and others at Cornell was to look on the many different kinds of living organisms as potential tools to be used in solving biological problems rather as forms to be ignored in favor of more important species such as white mouse or man.” (Randall W. Reyer, DBB)

## 15. Graduate Exams

Perhaps Hamilton's kindness came out most during exams. He knew these were tense times and he tried to break through the tension with his humor.

During the oral examinations, grad students would become so flustered because of all the studying that they had done, that you could just tap them on the heads and everything would fall out. Hamilton tried to ease the stress by asking disarming questions - things like "What was in the paper this morning?" or "How far can you run into the woods?" A few years later Bill Dilger Professor Hamilton, "How far *can* you run into the woods?" Hamilton replied, "Well, about half way then you've got to turn back."

"At my oral, tossing me a pignut hickory fruit and asking what made the chaw marks, and my silly pride afterwards while waiting to hear if I passed, knowing that I not only used the right approach in answering (where did it come from, etc.) but also pleased I had not muffed the catch!" (Derek Petitt, DBB)

"In an exam that I had, one of my early exams, we were sitting in a room in Fernow Hall and there were flies in the room. I think that they were cluster flies. He said, "You know, yesterday there weren't any cluster flies in here at all. Today there are a lot of them, how would you account for that?" Well, it was early in my experience with my committee. I didn't know any of them very well at that point, and I was trying to think of the lifecycle of cluster flies. In the late fall in houses, especially farmhouses, there would be a lot of them around the windows. They're a parasite of earthworms. The flies come out at that time, and they're quite sensitive to warmth, and they're looking for places to hibernate. Any window with a crack in it, they'll find that crack and get in. So I was thinking about the lifecycle of cluster flies and I said something about it and he said, "No that's not it." And I thought of another reason, and he said, "No that's not it." He said, "What's the temperature today?" and it was a warm day. Then he said, "The windows were open." They're just flown right in. He would do things like that, he'd trap you, and he delighted in it." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

"When I was taking my final exam for my Ph.D., he had with him a small black notebook. It was probably an address book. He pulled it out of his pocket, I don't know if there was anything written in that book. It could've had blank pages for all I know. He turned the page and then shakes his head. He would find something, and look up saying, "here's a good question." But I don't think that question was written in that book. He was a master at this. He'd say, "Suppose you're flying in a plane and you are lost. You could be any place on Earth, and you ran out of fuel and you landed. And after you landed you got out, and saw a plant, an animal and a rock (He knew some geology too). Then they'd ask you, "Where on earth would you be?" He [could] go anywhere on earth and know something about the native plants and animals of that area. I don't know how much travel he had done in China or Australia, but he knew the stuff that was there." – Verne Rockcastle



## 16. Graduate Thesis

His humor extended even to thesis writing. He knew what a burden it could be and how heavily it weighed on one's mind. Verne Rockcastle described his experience with Hamilton.

“When I was writing my thesis, as was with everyone who is writing a thesis, it's a big project. It was overwhelming. He said to me one Friday night when I was going home, “What are you doing this weekend?” And I said, “Nothing,” not knowing what he had in mind. He said, “Go home, write your thesis, bring it to me Monday morning and I'll sign it.” I didn't of course, but the fact that he didn't put this on me is the biggest load I ever had. He said it in a relaxed, jovial way. He took a big load off my mind. I felt freer about it from the attitude that he expressed.” (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

I heard a story about a graduate student who came into Bill's office to check on his thesis and Bill very calmly reached into the garbage and silently handed it to him. (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

## 17. Eating in the Office

It has sometimes been said that a man is what he eats. In the case of Hamilton, he had a personal culinary proximity to his subject matter.

“Hamilton was a great one for eating all different types of things. He had gathered a group of his graduate students together and told them about a woman in Danby who cans woodchuck every summer to eat during the winter.” (Howard Evans, 2006)

As graduate students entered Bill Hamilton’s office for a meeting, he asked them if they minded if he ate his lunch. They said that it was no problem. Bill went over to the window and pulled a string up that had a pigeon attached to it. He proceeded to pluck the feathers and dress the bird. He then remarked to the students, “We government employees don’t make a large salary. We’ve got to get by with what we can.”

(Charles Smith, 2006)

“In his stories, sometimes he would take a bite and sometimes fake a bite”  
(Glen Wolfenden, 2006)

“Years ago there was a professor here by the name of Jim Caslick. He retired probably fifteen years ago... Jim was also a graduate student here in the department back in the day when Hamilton was still a professor... Hamilton retired early... Hamilton used to have an office at the end of the hall... that was one big office. It since has been partitioned into three little offices. And Caslick had to visit Hamilton to get some papers signed as a graduate student. He knocked on the door – remember Hamilton was famous for eating [or] trying anything. He didn’t... believe that you could be a true field biologist if you didn’t know what all of these things tasted like and at least tried your study organism... If you look in his book, Mammals of [Eastern] North America, he talks about moles and shrews and mice. He’ll say, “This species is not particularly to my liking.” Whether he ate all those things -- I don’t know but I’m guessing he did. Anyways, Caslick knocks on Hamilton’s office door. Hamilton was this big, tall gruff sounding guy... Hamilton goes, “Yeah, what do you want? Come on in.” And so Caslick is this meek graduate student and he opens the door. Hamilton is over at the window with his hands out the window. He said, “Wait. Just a minute. Just a minute.” And he makes Caslick stand there quietly and then all of a sudden Caslick sees Hamilton jerk into the window and he pulls this pigeon through the window that he has just snared by the leg. There on his desk he already has a Bunsen Burner with a beaker of water boiling away. He says, “Alright Jim, what do you want?” So he tells him what he wants, and while he’s talking to him, Hamilton takes the pigeon and he flops its head on the desk and kills it. [He] rips open its breast – takes out the breast meat and puts it into the beaker of water that is boiling, and that is going to be his lunch for the day. That’s just the kind of guy he was. So here’s this graduate student who walks into the professor’s office and he watched him butcher this pigeon and catches it right in front of him -- pigeons that are just flying around the building. (Tom Gavin, 2006)

“He was on the committee of one of my friends, and was out at the Lab of Ornithology, Bill Dilger... was my friend’s major prof[essor] and they went ahead and had their exam and after the exam, why Hamilton had not been out to Sapsucker [Woods] before. And they were looking around at the various cages. They had some love birds there. There were some eggs there on the floor of one of the cages. And Hamilton said, “Are those eggs fresh?” Dilger said, “They weren’t there this morning...” And so Hamilton took the eggs, sticks them in his mouth, chews them up and spits out the shells. My friend said that they weren’t too clean. Anyways, I know that one’s true.” (John Whitaker, 2006)

## 18. Pushing Students to Publish

Publishing was, for him, a way of sharing the knowledge he had accrued with the world. In his generous way, he encouraged his graduate students to publish their findings, and in so doing, gave them their first start in the world of academia.

Professor Hamilton encouraged all of his grad students to publish. He stressed that if you had information it was an obligation to share it. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

Certainly the comment you made to me one day about a short note I had published in the *Journal of Mammalogy* was a real stimulant to me. At the time I didn't even know that you knew my name. (Frederick H. Test, DBB)

He could be severe to students who didn't pull their weight. He had no respect for students who weren't lending their shoulders to the load. He did a man and a half's work and expected other people to do their part too." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

"I don't think that he got trapped very often. If he did, I don't know what his reaction would be because I never saw him trapped. I remember one time he was giving out some leaflets. It was in Conservation 8, the vertebrate zoology class and there were some publications. He invited people to come up and take one of each publication. One guy who was taking some, now this was a class of graduate students, one guy was taking several. Bill Hamilton said something to him that I thought was kind of tart. He said, "You don't need to take any if you haven't written any yourself." Now this guy hadn't written anything. He hadn't published. Hamilton encourages graduate students to publish things, to get it into print - get your name out there. So I had written quite a few of the Cornell, rural school leaflets. This guy hadn't written anything and Bill didn't want him taking anything until he had contributed to the field himself. He was very sensitive about this; if you are going to take some stuff you'd better contribute yourself. Then he was generous to a fault. He would give no support to someone who had given their own. He got people to write. He got people to publish. I've published hundreds of things. I can attribute some of that to Bill Hamilton's insistence that if you're going to be in the field and discover things, then you have to write about those discoveries so that other people had the advantages of your knowledge." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

"Bob Dickerman (a graduate student of Hamilton's)... saw a 13-Lined Ground Squirrel that was killed by a car out west of here. He came back a few minutes later and it was being copulated with by a male. He thought it was interesting... [and so] he wrote a note. He submitted this to the Journal of mammalogy and the editor was E. Raymond Hall. He and Hamilton did not get along. Well, Hamilton looked at it and thought it was fine... He called it the Davidian Behavior... It's from an old limerick, "There was an old hermit named Dave. He kept a dead whore in his cave, dada da dada..." But he didn't say that in the note. Hall didn't know anything about behavior so he thought that it was the technical name. Well it is now! He had a leaping stroke -- blamed Hamilton for it... He told Dickerman that he would never publish another work of his in the Journal of Mammalogy" (Bill Dilger, 2006).

“Your encouragement prompted me to prepare a note on the hibernation site of meadow jumping mice, the first thing I ever published – a milestone in any scientist’s career! I also remember your consistent availability and warmth to any interested student. This has markedly influenced my own attitude in such situations and I think of it when sometimes finding myself a bit too hurried or busy” (Bill Dilger, DBB).

## 19. Notetaking and Journaling

Hamilton believed in the discipline of note taking. If a person faithfully kept his notes, then a wealth of information could be gathered. If you took the time to observe it, then you should take the time to write it down. If you write it down it becomes data. For over fifty years he kept a notebook by his side.

“I recall in Zool. Lit. your emphasis on note keeping and the values that could accrue to a man if he kept his notes faithfully. You then noted from your own notes of a bygone year that as you returned up the hill on a certain day you noted this hollow log filled with bees. Then in an aside, you read from a marginal note, "must return to check this log when class is not with me." (William E. Fahy, DBB)

## 20. Graduate Student Pranks

“It was fun playing tricks on you even though you usually discovered what was brewing much too quickly to suit us. But withal, you taught us a great deal about mammals, sharing your library and study collections and always ready to discuss questions with us.”  
Dick Frecher, DBB)

Occasionally a student would successfully pull one over on Professor Hamilton. One such time a graduate student sent a telegraph from Alaska, saying that he had in his possession a whale carcass and was sending it to Bill, cash on delivery. Bill was nervous for days. He paced back and forth in his office wondering how he would foot the bill. Finally the shipment arrived with a whale fetus in a gallon jar. Hamilton was lucky on two accounts - first on the account of not having to pay an exorbitant shipping cost and secondly because whale fetuses are quite rare. (Unknown source)

“He was retired. I was working on *Microtus pennsylvanicus*, Meadow Voles, and I had to start populations. I had to start a series. Six populations with the same number of animals... [Vole populations naturally fluctuate], so years are good years and others are bad years. Even in a bad year, if you're lucky, you can find them very locally abundant. You know, one or two fields. Anyways, I had to start this thing one spring and I couldn't get enough voles. So I advertised in the newspaper. I think I said I'd pay either 10¢ or 20¢ per vole. I'd figured some kids would go out and catch them and I would get things started that way. One day in my office I got a call from a man with a German accent who verified that I was going to pay good hard cash for these voles and how much I was going to pay and would I take all he could get. I said stupidly, sure. Yeah, I'll take all you can get me. Then he proceeded to tell me that he had 1,800 and that he had already done the math and figured out how much money I owed him. Then it hit me – the German accent. I said, “Well, Dr. Hamilton. I don't think I need that many at all.” And the person on the line hung up. I don't know that it was Wild Bill but he would call people under similar circumstances. And I suspect very strongly that the man on the phone was Wild Bill Hamilton.” (Harrison Ambrose, 2006)

## 21. Beast Feast & Cornell University Bread Line

The Conservation Department used to have a yearly pot-luck dinner where students and professors would bring in foraged meals. It was called Beast Feast. There at the banquet would be moose, deer, duck, beaver and trout. Hamilton brought his famous vole stew. Vegetarians would paddle up north side of Cayuga Lake to collect cattails and wild-rice (Ray Olgelsby, 2006). “The last one I went to [Hamilton] was there and Mike Richmond and Raney and some students. They had all his wonderful stuff - venison, goose and some moose meat and Meadow mouse and all that type of stuff -a lot of things.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

An informal food system arose during the 1950’s with graduate students who lived and cooked up on the third floor of Fernow Hall. It was known by students as the Cornell University Bread Line. They gathered baskets full of ‘drops’ from the apple orchard. Up in the eves they hung deer that they had hunted and stored bushels of ‘culled’ potatoes they had collected from the university plots in Varna. They would keep a watchful eye of the roads for fresh road-kill. Each student would pay a dime each semester to buy coffee, tea and sugar. In addition, prepared food was gathered for the restaurant at Martha Van Rensselaer Hall. The cooks would throw away whatever they hadn’t sold each evening. So the students asked, “Could you just give us this food instead of tossing it in the dumpster?” “I’m sorry. We can’t. It’s against New York State Law. We have to throw it away.” Another student chimed in, “Well, how about you throw it away in these clean containers that we’ll give you.” That was ok and so every night they would get something, sometimes five pounds of mashed potatoes and other times a single pork chop (Bill Dilger, 2006).

“And unused carcasses of mammals never now go to waste, even though I found that local butchers refused to grind such things in the hamburger.”  
(William E. Werner Jr., DBB)

“Do you recall how a group of us used to eat most of our meals at McGraw, mostly peanut butter sandwiches and handouts from Domicom? One time the Home Ed’s baked brown bread and we received all the loaves that two of us could carry. These we stored in a box on the fire escape and by cutting off the mould were kept in bread for several weeks.” (Arthur S. Hawkins, DBB)

“[There was a man who] was studying something about beaver while he was still down at Stimson. He got them from somewhere. They threw them into the dumpster after they were done with them. There they about 60 to 70 pounds. So [he] of course knew about it since he was down there and he gave us a call up at Fernow, “Come and get it guys”. So we all went down with our scalpels and butcher knives and got these beaver and brought them up. That meat was just delicious. So we tried the tail because we heard about it and we found out later that during the Voyager days they were Catholic and they were not allowed to eat meat on Fridays and the pope made a special statement of some kind that declared the beaver tail as fish. Only a Pope could do that. I couldn’t do that. We tried it and I was just solid gristle. It might be good with some vegetables in a stock or something but you can’t chew it.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)



## 22. Research

Hamilton tended to focus on aspects of the mammals natural history that was often neglected by other scientists. He looked at the stomach contents of thousands of animals to determine their diet. In addition he concerned himself with what was parasitizing these animals. He would collect the fleas, lice and other ectoparasites found on the fresh carcasses. - Ruth Hamilton Fisher

Hamilton was never at a loss for what to study. The fields surrounding Ithaca were rich in study organisms. His budget was rather slim. He believed that you did not need large grants to start a research project

“Research isn’t the difficult part, or even doing the research, but seeing the problem. Something that hasn’t been done, or the value, perhaps, of something that can be done.” (H.I.)

“The university orchard has twenty acres of fine field mouse habitat and that was close at hand. I studied over there for many years.” (H.I.)

“I knew much about him and came to know him as a gardener and horticultural expert as I did a mammalogist. We talked some about mammals. We shared some thoughts. I had a captive colony of *Microtus* when I came here and I kept those for a number of years and had students working on them. He never said anything about it but I think that he was always puzzled about why I spend so much of my time working on animals in captivity when there was so much work that could be done out in the field – trapping; live capture or snap trapping - that would follow up on his own work.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

When are you going to have an auction sale of the valuable research data you have never published? (Antoon de Vos, DBB)

As much, if not more data could be collected from field animals as laboratory one, “While it is considerably more difficult to secure data on this subject from field investigations, it seems logical to conclude that data so collected would be more trustworthy than that obtained from captive specimens.” (1937 - Activity and Home Range of the Field Mouse, *Microtus Pennsylvanicus Pennsylvanicus*)

“The relationship between field study and laboratory study are “essential” to each other.” (H.I.)

“That’s why I studied these animals. No one else had done it, you see. Or very few people had. So, in a way, I paved the way for these studies. In the weekly science magazine, the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, back in 1932 I published a little note, “A source of study for the country mammalogist,” and told them what we could do with these animals. And that was the beginning of a lot of studies of carcasses. So we get them from – the fur buyer. Buying up fur now, there’s one out your way in Lansing and they used to bring the carcasses, and they’d skin them, and throw them in a pile and I’d go out and look at them, and now they’ve got people over the State and then the Conservation Department began saving coyotes for me. So I got known for someone that was not afraid of getting their fingers dirty and sticking them in

the guts of a rotten animal. There was the devil to pay because I never got a laboratory for it and I had to do it in my office. So I stunk up the whole building. And one girl got sick and left. From the smell.” (H.I.)

“He did a lot with food habit studies and the actual interactions of animals in the field and much of this work was going on at a time when the other people working on small mammals were interested in – there was an enormous number of papers and effort that went into establishing the general area occupied by mammals -- the so-called home range and that was of interest at the time. Dice led those early studies and many of his students went onto study home range. That’s of value but it has not played out to any greater significance than knowing as much about the niche and how mammals interact with each other and with other members of the communities that they are in. The intricacies of that; that’s what Hamilton was working towards. His studies strike me as more niche oriented than habitat oriented. ...he looked at a lot of food habit studies, interactions between animals... The interactions with other animals, in feeding, their food habits, their parasites, their predators, their prey status of the animal. He was interested in community structure before we really got to thinking about [that].” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

Hamilton’s techniques were cost effective, “that kind of research could be funded at a fraction [of laboratory research].” (L.K. Todd, H.I.) Laboratory rodents were “entirely different” than wild rodents, “There are in the neighborhood offhand – half the population of mammal species in New York is rodents. And there’s only one rodent in the laboratory -- the white rat – the white mouse. A rabbit isn’t a rodent, so we’ve got to account for that. And there was no conflict there at all. Rats are used in the physiological and dietary and other studies, reproductive studies, but the field of wild animals has been little explored. And there was a wonderful opportunity to make contributions – new contributions – to studying these natural populations.” (H.I.)

“Well, the hardest part of research is not in the research, but seeing the problem. A lot of people can’t just visualize it. A lot of my work has been done on species of economic importance, and it leads to studies -- we may have a method or technique of controlling them. And that was largely my responsibility in working on field mice, which are cosmopolitan and worldwide in distribution in the Northern Hemisphere, and they do tremendous damage to agricultural crops. Sometimes unbeknownst to the farmer, they’ll take a third of the alfalfa crop or even destroy the young plants and the girdling of fruit trees and the like is well known. So I studied these with a view to learning all I could of them in finding the weak link in the life cycle so that we could better control than in that fashion. So a lot of my work had been done in that fashion.”

## 23. Grant Funding

He prided himself on having very little grant money... Anything from a razor blade to a couple of traps or provide enough information to learn about the environment. “Well that's true, when I began graduate school in 1961, even then the standing jokes that you'd hear from professors who talk with their students was, “What you need is a good notebook and pencil, a meter-stick and pack a lunch. Come back when you've done something worthwhile.” And it was possible to do that at that time, not in all ways but sort in natural history studies there was a lot of descriptive work that needed to be done and that could be done at that time. This was really a low-budget operation. You could get work done if you were curious about things without putting a lot of money in that.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

“I got a couple of hundred dollars from faculty research - a grant – but other than that I didn't have money. But we didn't need money for these things.” (H.I.)

“It distresses me today that so many people while I realize the necessity of support for many fields of research that are being undertaken that a lot of people won't commence work until they get a grant, until one is awarded them. They think that's the thing to do. And, unfortunately, the professors of graduate students feel the same way and press them to get a grant and help them write up a grant and a lot of them are nonsensical and ridiculous. And asking for exorbitant sums which are really non-existent and they don't get it. And then they get down in the dumps and they just don't carry on.” (H.I.)

“In the 30s and in the 20s -- early 30s -- there were no National Science Foundation or National Institute of Health, no money like that. The only money at Cornell was the Faculty Research Grant, which was maybe 50 bucks. As I mentioned Cy Crosby at the time -- he was a professor of entomology, who the Dean always sent to Albany to raise money for the college. He was good at it. And he told me one day, he sat down on the curb in front of Hill Drug -- that was a drugstore in college town, and he asked me what I was working on and I told him, and he -- the way I got to know was funny. I had to get through 3 1/2 years of college, you see, four years in 3 1/2 years, because I enlisted in February. And in order to do that I had to get four years residency so I went to two summer schools. One here at one the University of Kentucky -- the latter had just established a new biological station there, so I went down there. And when I was there, Cy Crosby and Professor Bishop of the University of Rochester came down to collect spiders, and they would take a horse feedbag with the mesh on the bottom and they'd put leaves on the forest floor and shake it over a pillow sheet and pick up these tiny little spiders almost microscopic size, and put them in a vial, rattle off the scientific name while several old diners would be standing there looking on. When I would speak up, Bishop told me not to talk, the natives couldn't understand my Brooklynese anyhow.

Well, that's Cy Crosby... So he raised the money, \$200 for this work that I carried on with the Field mice for about six years. And that was it... [His other money,] much of it would come from my own pocket. I was on the National Science Foundation grant's advisory committee in biological sciences for three years, and we pass on these fabulous grants -- or not pass on them. So when I finally got off the board in 1955 down there --

we met four times a year -- they wanted me to apply for a grant.... I said I don't need any money. I can manage well. Well, apply anyhow. You can finance one of your graduate students on a project. So I asked them for -- rather than \$75,000, I asked for \$7,500. And they -- they did not want to give me \$7,500. They wanted to make it an even \$10,000. Ridiculous! So it was held up for six months while they quibble over [it]. Well, I got that, and that was the only grant money I ever had. It financed a graduate student's work for three years. So, I would have problems that didn't need money. And you can still do it. But the students and the faculty are particularly obsessed with this. And the University gets a good share of it for handling the books on it.

“Finally, I was on National Science Foundation Biological Council for three years, the group that awarded grants to environmental biology and field studies – and finally the last year I was asked to apply for one, and I said, “Well, I don’t need one, but I have a student who could use money.” So they asked me, “How much do you want?” ... twenty or thirty thousand dollars? So I said, “How about seventy-five hundred dollars?” And he said, “We can’t do that. We have to make it a round figure,” so they said ten thousand. I said, “Well, I don’t need ten thousand.” I wanted to pay this graduate assistant twenty-five hundred a year for three years... He was a funny one. He was a son of an African missionary and he was in a religious group that he couldn’t do anything on Saturday and Sunday. He couldn’t even look down at the ground at the trap to see if anything was in it. I had a time with him, but we managed to work it out; and so they gave me this grant. But other than that, I got no money.” (H.I.)

## 24. Trapping

In 1934-1935, Hamilton “wanted to get some squirrels [to] study [their] reproduction.” He “set traps around the base of the big elms and oaks on the campus, between Goldwyn Smith and the old engineering buildings.” The dean of the engineering school, Dexter Kimball, “found a trap with a squirrel in it and ...turned it over and saw AHW (Albert Hazen Wright) on the bottom of the trap...He came storming over to zoology and asked who was responsible for the traps.” He knew that Wright was on sabbatical and he asked Hamilton if he knew who set them. Hamilton slyly denied any



THE COMPLETE MOUSE TRAPPER

knowledge of the traps. Kimball went the President and “raised the devil.” Hamilton replied to a letter from the President that “someone must have stolen the traps and set them out there.” That was a close one for Hamilton.

**Figure 5: Humorous photo depicting a mouse trapper in full regale**

Many of his animals came from road-kills, “it was distasteful to many people. Picking up animals dead on the road. We call them DOR. Dead on Road....Not DOA –dead on arrival. And we got a lot of material in that fashion – particularly the opossum. You’ve probably noticed a lot of carcasses on the

There he was, “...butt-deep in Ithaca’s eternal snows after meadow mice” (C.H. Wharton, Dear Bill Book)

highway. I could study this source of material – the opossum in northern New York, and the unique and bizarre reproductive pattern of the opossum and things of that sort. And so, here we are in an area that is totally uninvestigated. I could make contributions in that way. So there was no point in working with laboratory animals.”(H.I.)

“It doesn't seem like 30 years ago that I started corresponding with you and sending animal stomachs for you to explore.” (Charley W. Sage, Raw Fur Association, DBB)

“As one old rat trapper to another, let me commend you for the long and distinguished service that you've rendered in training students in your chosen field of mammalogy.” (W.B. Davis, DBB)

“You've been so busy the past few years that Old Gay suffered because of your absence at our meetings... As you know, for prices are very low when compared to every other things we buy or sell. Very few young men are entering the business today. To us old-timers, it seems terrible. The fur business is as old as America and to have it take a back seat is tough... A Philosopher like you should be present at all our confabs. (The Raw Fur Dealers Association of the State of New York, Chas.W. Sage, President, DBB)

“Funding for many of his projects come out of his own pocket. The money came from my pocket and it had to be small. And I'd go downtown to the dime store that used to be on State Street where the Commons is now, and mousetraps were two for a nickel. And I used to use three or four hundred... I would lose three and four hundred traps a year, let alone buy maybe sometimes six or seven hundred a year, to trap these animals. And I went one time into the dime store and I looked at the counter and there were six traps, two for a nickel, they're seventy-five cents apiece now. And I said, “Haven't you got more?” “How many do you want?” the girl asked. And I said, “A hundred.” And she went back to the manager and he was in a little booth and she pointed to him how much...and he pointed like this [motion to indicate he thought Hamilton was crazy], and I saw the manager and he said, “What do you want” I said, I told this young lady I wanted a hundred mouse traps.” “Now, don't get smart.” I said, “Look.” And I told him off. And I told him what I wanted them for. Well, then he got interested. And he said, “Come with me.” So he took my down to the basement where the material was stored, and there was a row of Hershey Bars this tall, and a rat had gone right down in the corner, each one, a nibbled a piece out. So he couldn't sell them. So I said, “You can't sell these.” “Oh, well I...” I said, “ You can't sell them, can you?” He said, “I guess not.” I said, “I'll buy them.” He said, “Yes.” And I said, “I'll give you a dime for all of them.” This was about twenty dollars worth. And he said, “Take them away.” So I took them and I got my mousetraps.” (H.I.)

## 25. Mammal Collection

Charles Dardia (2006), the curator of the mammal collection said that Hamilton was a man driven by curiosity. It was evident by looking at the wealth of things that came in from him. He admitted that about half of the things that Hamilton brought in were not collected by Hamilton because he had so many friends that were bringing in things. Hunters were bringing him mink skulls or people would send him the baculum of a certain animal so that he could do comparative anatomy work. There's a tremendous wealth of material. There is somewhere on the order of 5,000 specimens that Hamilton brought in. "He and his students are responsible for a lot of the mammals we have in our collection, which is why it is a good Northeastern and New York State collection." (Charles Smith, 2006)

Ed Raney's fish collection is tremendous, and the bird collection had been built up over time. Cornell has focused on these other taxa, birds and fish. Hamilton was trying to build the collection up from very little. There wasn't much of a mammal collection before he started. He drew on resources from colleagues around the world, as well as hunters and trappers from New York State and the Northeast. Hamilton built a usable collection that reflected the fauna of the region.

"An aspect of Hamilton's legacy that is sometimes not fully appreciated is his collecting and contribution of skins and specimens to the Cornell mammal collection. If you were to pull out a few of the drawers *Peromyscus* or *Microtus* and just take a look - these are both very common and there is drawer after drawer of each. If you look back at the earlier specimens, you can just see how many Hamilton contributed. There's just dozens and dozens. The presence of all that replication allows somebody today to ask more ecological types of questions about *Peromyscus* in the 1930's with *Peromyscus* today and that's an unusual opportunity because of all the duplication of the specimens. You can look at variability, which is an important part of so much of biology. Because of the duplication you can ask how common is this particular character and does it vary and if it varies, how much. A good collection does not neglect common species. Often times the collector will discard what is abundant and keep the unusual. *Microtus* is probably the most common mammal locally, and because it's so common, many people don't collect it to give to the University Museum. Well, Hamilton wasn't put off by the commonness, he collected and collected, and we see now the results of that and it's wonderful." (Peter Marks, 2006)

"When asked by an inquisitive visitor how often he removed the fur from each animal, the rancher replied, "Well, madam, after we pelt each animal two or three times, they become very nervous, and we must give them a long rest." (Hamilton, 1938)

## 26. Publications

Professor Hamilton published over 230 articles throughout his life. Beginning in 1928 with the humorously titled, "The Height From Which Rodents May Fall." In this paper he recounts "observations on the free-fall of a mouse from the third floor of McGraw Hall." (Howard Evans, DBB) "In the falling for squirrels spread its legs quite wide and moved them and the tail rapidly." He then quotes a "reliable observer [who] informs [him that] he has seen a common house rat leap from an eleventh story [window]." (The height from which rodents may fall, 1928)

"Hamilton's writing was charmed and easy to read" (Ruth Fisher, 2006)

"In part he has 230 papers because he published dozens and dozens of very short papers. Little notes describing a range extension for a species of mammal or a new report in a county. They are nice additions to natural history but not significant contributions to science in general, whereas his monograph on the woodchuck was really thorough. He described a species that he knew quite a bit about. He focused from time to time on major efforts and this time it was this one species, and he put out a very substantial piece of work that is still worth consulting today." (Peter Marks, 2006) "Hamilton wrote a big treatise on the woodchuck. It was the best thing ever written on the woodchuck." (Howard Evans, 2006)

Sure, the "texts and papers will supply some of the answers but none that I know of can supply the "color" or the facts of a "Wild Bill" analysis. (Earl A. Westervelts, DBB)

"The willingness and ability to write...is your greatest contribution, for it will outlast even your youngest student." (Dave B. Cook, Dear Bill Book)

"I told you before that there was a little animosity, in a way, between Wright and his brother-in-law, Arthur Allen, because Wright never thought well of people who wrote for popular subjects, particularly if he professed to be a scientist; and I felt that those who knew the subject, should be the ones who wrote the popular material. And then, as a consequence, I had to straddle the fence pretty much over the years." (H.I.)

**Bullfrog Farming**  
He also wrote a USDA publication on bullfrog farming! (Nina Lambert, 2006)

Hamilton wrote in the "most elegant English [which] made a deep upon me when we discuss projects in Washington. You have a rare talent for clarity of expression." (Arthur D. Hasler, DBB)

"First of all, I hope you'll continue to write - anything. Few scientists can match your talents for literary excellence, and I know many will be disappointed if we do not see a continuing output from you." (William Z. Lidicker, DBB)

Evidently rumors still abound about the existence of a text called the *Baculum as a Taxonomic Tool*. This paper's title is particularly ironic because the baculum is the penis bone found in many mammals. It may have been something that he mentioned in a lecture or told friends about. (Charles Smith, 2006)



“In your writings, reporting the results of your numerous and excellent researches, I find something of worth and enjoyment beyond the mere presentation of facts. Other peoples’ mammals “go down holes”, “go underground”, or “disappear into their dens”. However Hamiltonian mammals invariable “repair to their burrows.” (Frederick B. Emerson Jr., DBB)

“Your fame as a practical joker among your friends and acquaintances is widespread, and, I discovered, was well founded. But the numerous papers on mammals and herptiles impressed me most. These I also learned were a true indication of your research ability and activity.” (William E. Werner Jr., DBB)

“He once wrote a paper on the economic value of the toad in the garden... He came to the conclusion... that a toad was worth \$50 a year in eating harmful insects and keeping your garden free of other pests.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

## BOOKS

“It must be a great satisfaction to look back over such a list of important contributions in the field of Mammalogy: The Mammals of Eastern United States, American Mammals, The Biology of Microtine Cycles and a host of monographs on the life histories of American small mammals. (A.W.F. Banfield, DBB)

## MAMMALS OF THE EASTERN UNITED STATES

“He wrote the first natural history account of the Mammals of the Eastern United States. It went through a few additions before his student, John O. Whitaker joined with him and prepared the last edition... It's really a standard of the mammals of the eastern United States and John Whitaker kept it up today pretty well. He was a student of Hamilton's.” (Charles Smith, 2006)

John Whitaker was a graduate student of Hamilton's who helped revise *mammals of eastern North America*. For its third edition. Hamilton never got a chance to see the third edition in print, but its preparation was under way while he was still alive. - Howard Evans

“He had a grant... to work on shrews, *Sorex cinereus*, and while I was there I collected a whole bunch of these for him, about 500 individuals. And another guy was actually hired on the grant, the same guy who couldn't get along with him. He didn't know how to deal with him. He was supposed to be collecting these things and I took him out a couple times to show him how to collect them but he just couldn't get onto it. I think he got him five *Sorex cinereus* in three years or something like that. It was a terribly low number. At any rate, I got him a bunch of those and then after I came out here he never published anything on those. And I thought it should be something published. He had a big grant which was \$10,000 which of course now is trivial but back then was a pretty good-sized grant from the NSF... He had never done anything with it and I felt bad. So I wrote him and I said, “Bill, I'd be perfectly happy to take the specimens and look at their stomachs

and look for parasites. And work up the information for a paper.” He said, “Well, I don’t have them anymore. I don’t know what happened to them...” So he said, “How about you help me revise Mammals of the Eastern U.S.” and that's how we got into that. And so I essentially revised it, the first edition we are talking about in 1979. We put it out and I was not very happy with it. There were things that I didn't like at all in fact. And then later... Cornell contacted me and asked about revising it. And this is before he died. So right away I contacted Bill Hamilton to see if he was interested. He was surprised to see that they were interested, but anyway we did it. At first he said, “Well you do it alone.” I said, “No Bill. You did a lot of work on this and I can't do that... We'll revise it together.” So actually I did all of the writing, or almost all, and he edited it before he died. Then he died before it came out and that's how we got into that.” (John Whitaker, 2006)

## CONSERVATION IN THE UNITED STATES

“This is a book on conservation -- the first book on conservation in the United States. This book, Conservation in the United States came out in 1939. Professor A.F. Gusterson in Agronomy Department, Heinrich Reis in Geology, Cedric H. Guise in Forestry and myself authored [the book]. It was the first book on conservation. And it had quite a good sale for a number of years. About 10 years later other books on the same field were published. (H.I.)

In the winter Dick Weiss observed a plume of vapor from the posterior end of a Blue Jay. He wrote a note in Auk on breaking wind on a cold winter's day; *Flatulence in Blue Jays*. (Charles Smith, 2006)

## AMERICAN MAMMALS

“Your book on American Mammals has been a constant source of information whenever I was seeking specific data.” (Remington Kellogg, DBB)

## 27. Administrative

“When Professor Frederick B. Hutt, who was chairman of the Department, was asked to be also a chairman of the Zoology Department on the lower campus -- all zoology was on the lower campus than, including the Arts Zoology -- and I was in the same department, too, was asked to Chairman the department, he went on sabbatical and he went over to Dean Henry Neely Odgen and he asked to appoint me this Acting Head while he was gone. I was an associate professor then on again -- I think it was in 1941... And I wanted no part of it. I said if I wanted administrative, I would have accepted a job I was offered as a Dean of the graduate school of the University of Oklahoma at one time. I said no, I'm not interested in administration. And I went to Dean Ogden and said, "I don't want to serve on it." He said, "But you're going to." And I said, "No, I'm not." He said, "You are!" I said, "No, sir." "I said you are!" I said, "Yes, sir." (H.I.)

“He hated administration, he was actually chairman of zoology for a year or so because no one wanted to take it.” When Ben Young died Hamilton took the position. “It was an interim type of thing, he hated all administrative duties” Then when Hamilton left Fred Hutt came over from the poultry department because no one wanted to take the job.” (Howard Evans, 2006)

“I just don't care for administration. It's paperwork, and I get enough of that without being an administrator. And my interest was in research, and my students. And that was it. And I would have been taken away from that; no matter how much time they gave for it, once you get established in the front office, you spend time administrating and that's it. I was offered a Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Oklahoma way back in 1940 or '39. And I considered it. The salary was – more than double what I was getting here, three times what I was getting. But I knew that in time I would get tenure here, which I did, and right away. But I just don't care for administration. That's all.” (H.I.)

A graduate student was applying for a job to be a professor in the Department of Conservation. He conducted his graduate degree in primate behavior. He was giving his dissertation lecture to the faculty. Hamilton sat in the front-row and it was noticeable that

the student was directing his attention and energies towards Professor Hamilton. As the lecture wore on Hamilton began to slump in his chair and slowly his eyes closed. At the end of the lecture student asked if there are any questions. Hamilton jolted awake and mumbled, “ Well what did it taste like?” Nervously the graduate student asked Professor Hamilton to repeat himself. With the raising voice but no more clarity Hamilton repeated, “What did it taste like?” The graduate students said, “I'm sorry Professor Hamilton but I just cannot understand you.” Hamilton then raised his voice and said, “What did that damn thing taste like?” The graduate student admitted that he hadn't tasted his study animal. Hamilton then tore him apart telling him, “You mean to tell me that you've studied this beast for five years and you have no idea what it tastes like!” Sheepishly the graduate student admitted his ignorance and asked for other questions. (Tim Fahey, 2006)

At meeting or in the classroom, he would say, “You're going to have to excuse my appearance today the butler was sick and I had to dress myself.” (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)
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## 28.Extension

If the measure of a man is how much he extends himself to others, then Bill Hamilton was one huge man. His reach went far beyond Cornell.

*In traveling to the corners of the state as a representative of this Department and College, there has been one person that people have remembered and inquired about most often -- Bill Hamilton. Whether it's in Buffalo or Poughkeepsie, or whether the audience has been landowners, sportsmen or technicians, the same question has been presented often: "How's Bill Hamilton?" In my observation you, more than anyone else, have personified wildlife conservation or "Fish and game work" at Cornell. Your long and successful career has served that inspired many of our citizens in all corners of our state.*

*This circumstance is particular meaning for me and is a quality of your career that I find especially inspiring. It is this way because I know you have served the public well in addition to being an unusually standing and able leader and administrator. It is this breath of availability and service that is so marvelous, and to me, one striving in mostly the one area of public education, a source of real inspiration. Your genuine concern for the citizen with an interest or a problem seems so rare for scientists today, even something on the verge of extinction. I think this concern of yours that I rated so highly is especially well illustrated by the frequency of your contributions to the Conservationist, the fact that you always were the first to hand me your proposed contributions to Farm and Home Week and that you have kept in close touch with many sportsmen and trappers who furnished your research materials. (Harlan B. Brumsted, DBB)*

"I still get a chuckle when I recall Dr. Wright telling the story of the woman and the snake that got away "an old Bill Hamilton said, 'It was a pity that she did not have longer arms so she could have told us about a longer snake.'" Your protestations were always so sincere but unconvincing. I should've never confessed to the remark. It ruined a good show." (William Koster, DBB)

"You emphasized the importance in public service of prompt and courteous replies to correspondence. (however inane the request or misinformed the correspondent may be), and the boost given to personal relationships when one takes a little extra care to get titles straight and spell names correctly! I have tried to follow this advice in my work." (Frederick B. Emerson Jr., DBB)

"I will indeed miss the parade of insurance men, salesman, people with dead and somewhat rank animal carcasses, and sundry others, whom you referred to me with the remark that they had the "wrong" Hamilton. It has been most interesting to be continually asked if I am related to THE Hamilton, in tones both awestruck and irreverent" (Larry Hamilton (no relation), DBB)

Hamilton: Well, the staff was small then; and you're given a lot of things that no one else wanted. And I accepted them because I thought I could promote myself if I would do it. So I was in charge of all research – of all extension work on problems dealing with the birds and mammal. It was a big department, but they would have no part of practical aspects -- the economic aspects. So I took down on... mammals and reptiles... and everything dealing with vertebrates. So I headed a big field, and a big part in Extension work.” (H.I.)

## PUBLIC LECTURES

“In looking back over our years together I shall never forget that talk [that] you gave in Rochester to the State Conservation Council on mice and muskrats. I bet that anyone who heard you that night can give the whole talk from beginning to end.” (Eph Palmer, DBB)

“I once gave a talk, titled “Better dead than alive.” And there was quite a crowd there. They came to hear this nonsensical title, for they knew I was going to discuss the research opportunities of these highway victims.

So I had quite a crowd there, [to hear my title], “Better dead than alive.” They didn’t come to hear what Hamilton was going to talk about; but they wanted to know what the title was about. And I explained that you couldn’t study ectoparasites and endoparasites – internal ones – reproductive tracts, stomach contents and the like on a live animal. So I told them how to proceed and what to do. Carry a gallon of Formalin and a couple of single-edge razor blades on the windshield of your car and you could get no end of material.” (H.I.)

“[Your] undelivered speech on “Reproduction in the opossum”, at the Southern Cal[ifornia] meeting [of the American Society of Mammalogists], all have served to brighten up the atmosphere for the non-professional mammalogist attending the meetings. Did you ever decide to do live for the above-mentioned speech you may want to add a footnote. About 20 years ago the local game warden (a product of this area and without benefit of a degree or official training) and I were discussing the possibility of getting reproductive tracts from some of the mammals of this locality. Finally we got around to discussing the opossum. He said: “That ‘possum’s a funny one -- the way them babies get into the pouch. You know some folks think the young are born through the mother’s nose and she blows them into the pouch. But I don’t believe that.” Then he turned to me and said: “Do you know how the young get into the pouch?” And when I confess that I did not, he very officially said: “Well, they are born right through the teats!” (Kenneth L. Duke, DBB)

“Around 1942 they had just completed Olin Hall. In Olin they had one of the biggest auditoriums on campus. Hamilton invited one of his friends to give a talk on wolves. It was advertised campus-wide and everybody came to this thing...when this guy started to talk Hamilton sat in the back and started to howl like a wolf. He hid behind someone and howled and howled a couple more times. They said that they were about to call the police or something. So Hamilton didn’t do it again. The guy completed his lecture. Some people knew that Hamilton had done this and this was a person Hamilton

had invited to talk. This was someone who Hamilton knew could take it I guess.” - Howard Evans

## ON THE RADIO

Hamilton was on Eph Palmer’s weekly radio program, "This Week in Nature." (L.K. Todd, H.I.) “You see, there were so many scientists -- so-called scientists -- that look askance at popularizing their subject, or even writing for it, and I feel quite differently, as I indicated, that people who are well acquainted with the subject of natural history and field biology are the ones that should publicize and popularize it. Otherwise, they'll get the material wrong. And there are so many errors in the journals and in the popular magazines today that write on Natural History that it is very disconcerting to those who know the subject. (H.I.)

“We were lacking in easy-going and funny relatives so he shone even brighter in our lives and we eagerly anticipated seeing him on all possible occasions. As we grew older we realized how accomplished he was in his field – I remember listening to the radio early mornings before school – no television then – and would hear a quote from him on a scientific subject delivered with great authority. On more than one occasion I remember thinking, “he must have been kidding, but the announcer didn’t realize it.” His personality was as large as his academic recognition and even a few years ago I met an Ithacan in southern Sicily who remembered him from days long ago on Highland Avenue. When some years ago I volunteered taking my nephew college visiting, I choose Cornell just so that we could visit him and give my nephew the great joy of meeting and speaking with him in his beloved Cornell environment.” (Connie Greenspan, niece, written correspondence)

## CALLED BY MAGAZINES

As an example, quite frequently I get calls from the Editorial Office of the Readers Digest and am asked about... the subject matter -- if it's correct before they published it; and they may talk an hour on the phone. And I get uneasy because of the money being spent on phone calls -- even if it's not my own. And when I correct them, they paid no attention and they come out in error. So that's the situation. And that's why feel that people who are acquainted with the subject are the ones that should publicize it. Palmer did that in large measure, just as the Comstock did.” (H.I.)

## PUBLIC INQUIRIES

“An older woman came in to Fernow one day and brought in the specimen of a salamander in a bag and he took it out of the bag and looked at it and said, "Well, it's one of two species and they are identical to look at. One of them is deadly poisonous and the other one is not. And there's no way to tell which one is which by looking.” Now, he was legendary for eating things...So, he ate the salamander and then proceeded to fall on the floor and said nothing and closed his eyes and this poor woman did not know

anything about this man when she was running down the hall yelling, “Help, help!” The upshot of the whole thing is that she was eventually told that this was Professor Hamilton and that he played games and tricks and that she wasn’t to worry. You can imagine, though, that for a second she thought she gave him the wrong salamander and killed the professor.” (Peter Marks, 2006)

## EXTENSION WITH FARMERS

So I studied the cyclic populations – fluctuations – like the tent caterpillar you’re familiar with, and to a lesser extent, the gypsy moth. Field mice have a four-year cycle. And I found out why and how these cycles – I think I did – I was recognized as such, anyhow – in finding out why these and how these populations compete – increased and then dropped out with a crash, you know. Became almost non-existent in the field. So I could tell the orchardists and other farmers of the state when to anticipate a heavy increase and get ready to prepare for it – by poisoning and tree guards and other things. So that was the opportunity, you see. Abundant material. When you work with an animal which is abundant, you can sometimes develop new biological principles. Some are commonplace which has nothing to do with – perhaps it does in other species. But it can be applied to all of them.

“Then another time - he would always pass these jokes often other people that people played on him. One time I came in and he said, “Do you want some fertilizer for your garden?” He had this bushel basket full of these patties - cow patties. So I said, “Where did you get them?” He told me that a guy had sent in a piece of the paddy and asked if it was moose so I told him, “From that small of sample I can’t tell. [I’ve] got to have more.” So this guy went out and collected a bushel basket of these dried cow patties and sent it to him COD. The department paid for the bushel and he opened it up and could immediately tell it was from cows. Hamilton said, “It serves me right. I shouldn’t have asked for more.” (Howard Evans, 2006)

“A farmer came in to ask him about mouse damage in his apple orchard and Hamilton would tease him and tell him things at the same time. This guy was so distinguished looking, he had a white beard and he looks like a real distinguished person. So, Hamilton said to him, “If you play along with me for a half-hour, I have a friend I would like to play a joke on. If you play along with me I’ll tell you all you want to know about these mice.” This farmers was very confused and asked Hamilton what he meant. Hamilton said, “I’m one to introduce you to my friend as Jay Braiser Howell. My friend idolizes Howell because he wrote this book on aquatic mammals and he wrote a book on speed and animals. My friend is a real devotee of his. So he called Perry Gilbert up on the phone who was on the third floor of Stimson. He said, “I’ve got a visitor here, a man I think you’d like to meet. It’s Jay Braiser Howell. So Perry came down into his office on the second floor and this farmer got up to shake hands with him. Perry was telling him how glad he was to meet him. And Perry, after some pleasantries about the trees and the weather, started asking him some questions about aquatic mammals in his book. The farmer said that he didn’t remember. He was trying to get out it. Then Perry asked him something and the farmer turned to Hamilton and said, “I can’t go on with this any further

this man is asking the questions that are real and I can't answer him!" So, Hamilton had to admit that this guy was just a local farmer that came in to ask about mouse damage. You can just imagine Hamilton putting him in this position and petrifying him." (Howard Evans, 2006)

## RETURNED INQUIRIES QUICKLY

In a remarkable way Hamilton was able to serve scientists, his students and the community. He promptly replied to community inquiries.

"Then, along with the research -- popular bulletins -- we get requests on growing rabbits. And I had to answer those. Well, I grew a few rabbits when I was a boy. So, in self-defense, rather than answer a hundred letters a week, I'd send a mimeograph letter out, and sometimes we got that many. These schemes in the Depression years, there were many on raising rabbits. Read by all you raise -- that was the slogan, you see he paid a fabulous prize for a buck and two does of a special breed, nothing special about them -- they bought trash rabbits and sold them as special stock. And they were getting 30 bucks for a male and two females, and where they were paying \$0.35 or \$0.40 a piece for the rabbit. I had to get a rabbit bulletin so I wrote one on that, and told them to watch their step on buying stock. (H.I.)

"You see, they didn't know what the Extension word meant, because -- as far as biology is concerned. And they knew someone probably had to do it, but what it was, they didn't know. And in order to handle -- and answer these letters -- we had to know- have the answers. So we had to find them out ourselves because they were non-existent, they weren't in books. And that's one reason, too, we carried this on. And I didn't get support for this. I never asked for it." (H.I.)

"No, no. no. Charlie Palmer wanted emphasis on his work. I remember he lived in Bryan Tract, not far from where that gas station is, near Maple Avenue and Dryden Road align -- where the three or four of those streets, south of there. The starlings roosted in some of the maples in front of his house, and the droppings were so bad when Mrs. Palm would come out, she had to take an umbrella to get in her car. I'm not exaggerating. There was a roost in there. And he said, "We want to do something. We want to learn some controls for this." The police came up and they were shooting shotguns off a couple of times, but it wasn't effective. He got Gus Swanson to appoint someone to investigate it. He couldn't get the bird people to do anything about it -- they were way off. They were recording bird songs and doing other things. And so he came to me -- Swanson did - and said, "I want you to tackle this problem." I said, "No, you've got eight ornithologists at Cornell and I'm working on mammals. You turn one of these superfluous bird people loose on the subject." "No, I want you to do it." I told him. "No, Swanson, you do it." And he went off mad. But the starlings finally left. I think Charlie had to move. Well, he did move, and that was the situation that he emphasized -- the



practical aspects, and ... Yes, he was good. No, Charlie didn't interfere. In fact, he helped us a great deal and went along with our work and promoted it." (H.I.)

"I remember once I had to handle snakes and they sent snakes to me for identification. If they came in the summer they'd be put in a long envelope. It stunk to high heaven. And they'd always come to the post office downtown. And finally the postmaster called me and he said, "Hamilton," he said, "you've got to stop... one man has quit and one threw up on the floor here, and I just can't take this anymore." I said, "I'm not responsible. I don't know anything about it. These people just send them to the University for identification, and they're passed on to me. And finally my name got known that I was the one who answered the questions and they're addressed to me." But we had those problems. (H.I.)

## 29. In the Field

Hamilton loved to touch nature and to taste it. Nothing please him more than going out into the field to study. His knowledge of the field was encyclopedic and it never ceased to amaze his students and colleagues.

“Anyone who was willing to go out and spend the night in the woods regardless of the weather -- he had respect for that person. I had gone to college at Syracuse, before I came here and I've spent a lot of time in the woods. I loved the woods. I'd be out in the woods all night on my hands and knees following salamanders and he respected that. I wasn't one who just looked at them in the lab. I was out there where they lived, and taking pictures at night of the animals.” (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

“He was very much an outdoors person. He gave the impression of being kind of gruff, a little rough around the edges, but he was a very sensitive guy. He saw beauty in nature. To him a field mouse was a beautiful animal. At the same time, he studied meadow mice and could tell you all kinds of things, all sorts of things. He would open them up to see what they had been eating and so forth. He would handle things that most people would disdain touching. He had no frills. He was just a very much-at-home guy at whatever he was



**Figure 6: Hamilton weighing a specimen in the field**

Hamilton decided to test whether using peanut butter in mammal traps was a waste of time and resources. He set out two lines of small mammal traps, “One peanut butter-baited and [the other] unbaited” They both had “comparable results” In his notes he wrote “nothing was caught in any of the traps.” (Frederick B. Emerson Jr., DBB)

### **Are Muskrats Good This Year?**

Ollie Hewitt and Bill Dilger went “hiking with Hamilton in the Montezuma Marshes north of here and [came upon] a shack in which some trappers were skinning muskrat. Hamilton asked if the muskrat had been running good this year and without waiting for an answer, reached over, took a bite out of one of the carcasses, and answering his own question, announced “Yep, they sure are”. After they left, [Bill] asked him why he'd done that... Hamilton rejoined, “Oh, those guys don't have much to talk about all day just running their trap lines and skinning them out. Now they got something to talk about.” (Nina Lambert, 2006)

doing. He was just as much at home in Australia, as he was in Grant Park. He spent a lot of time in the field and he knew meadow mice better than any other animal, because he spent hours and hours and hours among meadow mice -- not just in the lab but in the field. He knew red squirrels, almost better than anyone (there was a guy who did his thesis on red squirrels, who was in Fernow. But outside of that person Hamilton knew red squirrels better than anyone else) because he spent a lot of time with red squirrels. He spent time with woodchucks. He spent time with white-tailed deer. He just knew animals.” (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

“He was a pit-bull in the field. He knew all kinds of things. They would all be just about dying with him eating earthworms and meadow mice and things.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

“Every time he had an occasion to be in the field, he would open a mouse up, if he could catch a mouse. Or he would set traps. He would look at the food contents. Most people would be content with making a skin and throwing the carcass away, or maybe save the skull. But he was very interested with what was going on in the feeding habits of every animal that he was investigating. So he would record it. He kept notebooks, every day he would write down what he did and what he saw.” - Howard Evans

“He would take field trips out. On field trips people would ask him dumb questions and sometimes he would give them dumb answer. One field trip he was on with a bunch of students walking around in the Plantations somewhere. Someone asked about this white pigeon that was walking around. He said, “Oh that's an albino crow.” People were writing down albino crow. After a few minutes he told them, “That white pigeon you saw, it was no crow. You should have been able to tell that.” (Howard Evans, 2006)

“In 1946 as the ichthyology class seined it's way up Taughannock Creek toward the Falls I remember you holding forth at length before the wide-eyed innocents on the special delicate flavor of jack-in-the-pulpit. At the finish of your talk he popped the head of the pulpit in your mouth and chewed (apparently) with relish. Ah, the consternation of those who followed suit. Recollections of these field trips would not be complete without reference to the shouts of horror that went up by the same innocents as the head Osmerus was snapped off by Hamiltonian incisors.” (William E. Fahy, DBB)

“There are a lot of other things for which I acknowledge indebtedness: among others, the crunchy, crispness of a mouthful of young, spring-fresh skunk cabbage leaf and its sweet aftermath; your loyalty and self-sacrifice in chairing an examination for me here while suffering the discomfort, trepidation, and pain of intestinal amebiasis.” (Dick Ryan, DBB)

“He was showing a group how to use a fox trap, and he came down the wrong way and caught his hand. It really hurt him badly. He never gave any indication that he hurt his hand. But I knew that it hurt himself. He would always pull little stunts on students that he thought were goofing off. (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

“I remember, too, your ingenuity when I went on a field trip with you to study microtine populations. I forgot the clippers with which we were going to excise the digits of the rodents as marks for future recognition. Bt did you reprimand me? No, with true Hamiltonian ingenuity you proceeded to bit off the unwanted phalanges.” (Karl F. Lagler, DBB)

### 30. Courses

A rabbi of the Talmud was once asked, “Rabbi, how can I influence the coming year.” “Plant some wheat.” “And what if I want to influence a whole generation?” “Then plant a tree.” “Yes, rabbi, but what if I want to influence eternity?” Then, the rabbi responded, “Instruct a student.”

“His firsthand knowledge of vertebrates was incredible. He also was amazing in his knowledge of plants and not just vascular plants, but mosses and algae. His knowledge of nature was phenomenal. He would go to almost any length to lesson. He was very short with any person who was going to teach and hadn't prepared himself well beforehand. He had no time for them. Teaching had to be complete...he had firsthand knowledge. [He had] experience...in the field. He had experienced this researching them in his office - dissecting them finding out all the details about them but keeping all the details in reference to a living field frame. That made him different. (Verne Rockcastle, 2006).

“I had never seen him unprepared. The one-time I saw him chew out a student, he really chewed out a TA in natural resources for coming to lab without being completely prepared for the lab he was going to teach in. The student never forgot that.” – Verne Rockcastle

“Don't rely on your assistants too much. Don't give them too much to do and come into the lab... Oftentimes a professor will just give a lecture and leave the rest of the interesting part of the course – lab work – to a young assistant who is usually not too knowledgeable. It's important that you go into the lab and talk and discuss things, give the assistant full rein and leave to his own judgment what he should do, but always be ready to help answer questions. I was lucky always to have, for the most part, excellent assistants. They were my graduate students and they were helping with the course...” (H.I.)

“He had such an incredibly lively mind. It's almost as if he couldn't be satisfied by his serious studies alone, so he needed to add all these points of whimsy to keep himself intellectually stimulated.” (Don Rakow, 2006)

“He was a wonderful teacher and a wonderful guy in the field. He was very imaginative. He asked questions that were imaginative. He was a great professor. Of course, you had to be somewhat bright [yourself] to start with. Otherwise, you wouldn't catch the things he told you that were true.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

“He was a great teacher in his own way... based on specimens, he'd give you the biology of it and then go onto fiction and you had to figure out where one ended and the other began.” (Glen Woolfenden, 2006)

“That was part of his technique. He would take a fact - give it - then say something general about it, then he would say something and you had to figure out where the facts stopped and the theory stopped and the fiction began” (Glen Woolfenden, 2006)

“Here's something for the stories he told. He would give a fact and build on the fact for a sequence of several points and finally the points he had developed were so ridiculous that you knew that it had to be a fake or was wrong but you didn't know how far back to stop where the truth ended and the fiction began.” (Glen Woolfenden, 2006)

I had the...”opportunity to listen to your lectures cram-packed with mis-information, falsehoods and other devices designed to confuse and confound. (Charles F. Cole, DBB)

#### ECONOMIC CONSERVATION OR ECONOMIC BIOLOGY

“William J. Hamilton Jr.'s course in economic biology was a one hour course... and of course he talked about rat and mouse control a lot because he was big on that and it was an important problem -- Norway rats and House Mice, also about Meadow Mice in orchards and things like that can be a problem. For the final exam among other questions, you're supposed to write a 250 word newspaper article about why some animals deleterious to our interests and what to do about it. I knew that everyone was going to write about the Norway rat and I just couldn't do that. So I wrote about the common Robin... I said it was noisy in the morning when people try to sleep. It ate small fruits that people rather enjoyed themselves, either fresh or in jellies or jams... and they ate earthworms in great quantities, we've all seen that on the campus, and even Darwin pointed out how valuable earthworms were. So I thought that this was an animal that needed to be controlled. So I recommended that people poke the nests out of trees or bushes... and stomp on the contents. And poison the adults with a mixture of arsenic and cherries. I saw Hamilton... on the opposite side of Tower road one day. I was going down and he was coming up towards Fernow. He said, “Bill.” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “You work up there with Allen and that gang in Fernow Hall don't you?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “You did. I'm going to send this to the Ladies Home Journal and everyone in the country will read it.” But he must have had it duplicated, mimeographed, or whatever... Every time I met another professor he would laugh about it and ask was I the one who wrote it. I had to admit that it was true. I was on the blacklist...for the rest of my life I think... I got full credit for it by the way.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

“Somehow or other he got the pecker [penis] out of a bull. It is a long pecker about so long [3 feet]. And he dried it and made a stick and he used it to point out stuff during his lectures. He had a bull's pecker dried and it was about the thickness of your thumb. It's about 3 feet or so, because it has to go a long way. So he had that and he used it as a pointer during a lecture.” (Samuel Leonard, 2006)

## MAMMALOGY

“He certainly helped establish [mammalogy] in a big way in this country from his early work. There were people who studied mammals of course in Europe and the 19th-century and even here, early naturalists did

Will [future generations of students] be offered the privilege of being charged fifty bucks extra for registering for a mammalogy minor? (Kenneth C. Parkes, DBB)

work with mammals. But Hamilton and some of his early colleagues where mammalogy was first offered as one of the first courses, a separate course. Hamilton was instrumental in establishing it as a science and a curriculum of subjects relative to mammals through the United States, throughout the United States at universities. He was the father, the father of mammalogy. Now I really haven't spent time delving in into the history of mammalogy and you might in your work find that there's an argument that others may have contributed as much or more but I don't think so. There's some earlier writers, some early participants in it. They wrote about single species, usually a large game species. The smaller and medium-sized mammals which were of minimum food value and therefore less interest at the time were just not given much attention. He brought attention to the whole array; from the marsupials and bats and insectivores all the way up to the larger land mammals that we have here, the entire spectrum of the mammals in North America. There are others who are simultaneously looking at mammals in a similar way in other parts of the world, in Europe for example. Very little of that in Africa at the time and if it existed in South America we know very little about it and still there is much work to be done with the Central and South American mammals although things have grown rapidly since 1960. The science doesn't go back very far beyond Bill Hamilton's involvement at Cornell and teaching of these courses.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

“There is no doubt in my mind that your beginning course in mammalogy stimulated me to go on to study mammalogy in a much more systematic and serious way. As the years have gone by, I realize more and more how important a course that was. It has, without a doubt, influenced my life and has been responsible, in part, for the position which I hold now. Cornell has been famous the world over for its high quality of men in the field of Natural Sciences and you certainly have played a dominant role in this reputation.” (James B. Cope, DBB)

“...since that October morning, now twenty-nine years gone, when at McClean Bog a class watched as you bent over to retrieve a mouse you had trapped, at the base of a grassy tussock. For a moment you scrutinized it closely, ruffling back the fur, almost as if in disbelief, then with a look of triumph on your face held it aloft with the cry,

I recall your saying in class some years ago what a thrill it would be to discover a new species of mouse at the very stoop of the Statue of Liberty. (Jack L. Gottschang, DBB)

“Pitymys pinetorum scalopsoides, the SECOND RECORD IN FORTY YEARS!”

I remember... “Seeing the photographic records of big game in and about the Ithaca area? That one student from three years ago is still amazed at the prospect of five-foot cottontail rabbits being abroad in your favorite hunting grounds.” (Paul S. Cassidy, DBB)

“He was so funny. He told the most outrageous things to students and they believed him. It was all cotton-wool nonsense. We were in Ringwood one time and he was showing how to set traps for small mammals. They were Museums-specials [describe trap] and he was setting them for Redback Voles and whatnot. He was putting in a mixture of peanut butter and oats on the treadle. Well I've done this, but I used to put a big mound on, but I didn't say anything. He just put a little smear that you could hardly see it there. Fortunately one of the other students said, “You don't put much on there, do you Dr. Hamilton?” He shot back, “Well they don't eat much!” Then he would walk off and say, “Don't go there, I put a bear pitfall right there.” Then everyone would be walking around this area.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

After one of the mammalogy lectures I was talking to him... I said that I saw Indian Elephant in the wild in Burma. There were some remarkable things that I didn't think that they could do. They could climb cliff faces. You don't think of an elephant as being [able to do that]. I don't know how it gets started but they wear a place into steps... and it must take a hundred or thousand generations, but they have a path. He said, “I'll tell you what, you can tell the students about it tomorrow.” Well, I didn't want to do that. I thought he would forget about it. Then next day he said, “Oh, before I get started, Bill's got something to talk about here.” Then he turned to me and I said, “Well, what do I talk about?” He said, “About five minutes.” He said, “Bill?” I could have shot him. He was a great guy.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

“One year after a snowfall, [he] took a Zoo. 8 class on a field trip to study animal tracks. Coming upon a deer trail, the professor knelt down, put his fingers in the snowy track and proclaimed, “These tracks must be very fresh; they're still warm!” And, being in the presence of the great naturalist, many of the students believed you, momentarily, at least! (Ralph W. Yerger. DBB)

While in the field with a class he would scoop up a few rabbit pellets in his hand and ask, “Do you know how to tell the difference between these and deer pellets?” The students returned blank stares. “Well the only way to know is to taste them.” And then he would feign tasting them as student's eyes became wider. “Well. Sometimes you say things you'd like to retract. I once showed them the difference between deer and rabbit droppings, and they're distinct but they look somewhat similar. And I said, “These rabbit droppings look very much like Lydia Pinkham pills and they're just as good for you.” Do you know who Lydia Pinkham....Well, that was a famous pill that years ago it was for everything and anything, and our mothers used to always give the children, they'd make them change their underwear and take a bath Saturday night and take a couple if Lydia Pinkham pills to clean out the insides good, for the coming Sunday. I often thought it anyone reported that Lydia would have sued me, and boy, I would have been in trouble.” (H.I.)

#### **Bear trap in the Middle of the Trail**

“On field trips, he would suddenly stop to warn students to walk around a section of the trail since he had a bear pit dug under the path... they would obediently do just that.” (Nina Lambert, written correspondent) Then he would proceed to walk right over the ‘trap’ himself (Bill Dilger, 2006)





VERTEBRATE ZOOLOGY, VERTEBRATE BIOLOGY  
VERT 8 OR ZOO 8

“You used to take a full year course of Conservation 8 and a whole year of Vertebrate Anatomy... The first term in Conservation 8, [which is also known as] Zoo 8 then, when I took it, was all fish, because more than half of the vertebrates were fish... Then close to Christmas vacation we might have a little on amphibians and then reptiles and mammals and they didn't even bother with birds, because Allen did that. That was really tough.” (Bill Dilger, 2006)

“So long as Vertebrate Zoology is taught the birthmark that you have placed on hundreds of embryonic teachers will be transferred yet to others who will become teachers. Also, each student of zoology as he reads of your observations and thoughts will, in a very real measure, keep you going.” (Arthur H. Cook, DBB)

“The field trips which you led. Nothing I took in college was more useful to me than the broad field training you gave us in practically everything we encountered, plants, birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles – the works. I have been afield with many experts in one group or another but never with anyone, except you, who knew so many interesting things about so many different forms. Of the many contributions you have made, for me, personally, this was the greatest.” (Arthur S. Hawkins, DBB)

“After one of our first field trips, I wondered why your course was not included in the physical training program.” (Howard Evan, DBB)

“...when the course in vertebrate natural history was initiated here, a good deal of your material and ideas formed the base for the work on mammals.” (Richard C. Snyder, DBB)

“I took mammalogy. In fact the first time I had it was in Albert Wrights Vertebrate Zoology, two semester course... He was the lab and field semester for the spring section. He had one section and Ed Raney had the other section... It was in Stimson, the second floor.” (Allen Benton, 2006)

“The vertebrate zoology was taught by Raney and Hamilton -- Raney in the fall term and Hamilton in the spring part, it was a year course. Following that I took ichthyology from Raney and mammalogy from Hamilton.” (Glen Woolfenden, 2006)

“It grows out of [the field work] -- you teach vertebrate biology, then you're dealing with the fish, amphibians, birds and finally mammals. So there's a wide range of things to deal with there. So actually early and initial interest in the vertebrate group was directed at fish and birds and I would say more was known about them and more interest [was] shown there because of the visibility and suitability as food.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

“...the insertion of the tourist kodachrome of a dog team in the lecture on New York marten distribution...” (A.W.F. Banfield, DBB)

“In Vert[berate] Zoo[logy] he always had a picture... of two people on a dogsled... I guess it was taken in Alaska. This story would take 20 minutes or a half hour in class and the students would take notes... He would say he's the guy on the sled and I was the guy with him... The punch line was that they went up to this great big mountain and came to a cliff and they both fell over and they were never heard of since. That was the first [time] that they would have any idea that this was a load of bull.” (John Whitaker, 2006)

[I remember your]...brand of vertebrate zoology. I remember these things as well as details like the number of toes on a two-toed sloth, the color of the feet of a white-footed mouse, and the food habits of an anteater. (Frederick B. Emerson Jr., DBB)

He was teaching a vertebrate zoology lab and he said, “today we are going to look at the stomach contents and reproductive organs of the Fisher.” He already had a specimen thawed out from the freezer on the lab that he was working on. He at his hands in the carcass with a short butcher's knife for a few minutes. He became noticeably distressed and the next moment he made a jerking motion and swiftly threw his hands up from the Fisher. Blood streamed down his hands and splattered his white lab coat. With a look of terror on his face he looked at his hands and screamed, “I just cut my finger. Somebody call an ambulance!” One woman immediately fainted, another two people went sick to their stomachs while Professor Hamilton ran out of the room screaming, “ Call an ambulance!” he was not seen in Fernow for the rest of the day. The next day a student passed by his office and saw him working away as if nothing had happened. – retold by Elan Margulies

“He wanted to show people the ruminant's stomach which had four chambers. He took the class over to the postmortem room in the vet college. They had a cow there on the table and he pulled the razor blade out of his pocket with which he was going to free the stomach. But he lost the razor blade in the abdomen of the cow and somebody had to come with a knife to take it out for him. That was like a fiasco when he lost the blade – Perry Gilbert told me that story” - Howard Evans

I also get a laugh out of the time that you and I had a Zoo 8 class out on a trip and you were more convincing. You had one student so convinced about the freshness of some red squirrel tracks and that they might still be warm that he reached over to feel the snow.” (William J. Koster, DBB)

“He led the New York ladies with shorts through blackberry brambles on the first trip of class.” (Anna and Albert Hazen Wright, DBB)

On the Vert[berate] Zoo[logy] what he would do was he would have everybody go out and catch some snakes and lizard... The trip was out to Ringwood. Someone caught a large female Garter snake and he wanted to show the [live birth]. And so he didn't have quite enough hands so he stuck the snake in his mouth and it let loose with its glands all

over the place and it stinks... So he took the snake live and cut it open and showed the kids the baby snakes.” (John Whitaker, 2006)

## CONSERVATION 8 & TODAY

“He taught mammalogy and he taught some of our introductory courses... There was a course called conservation 8...[which] was very much like introductory field biology... this is a two semester broadly based survey course which we now cram into one semester oddly enough.” (Charles Smith, 2006)

”You can’t give comparative anatomy in a single semester. You must have two semesters to give a well-rounded course. So in that respect, that particular niche in the overall picture has been neglected somewhat; but I think now it’s coming back to its former status and we really think we’re one of the best sources of field biology.” (H.I.)

“Field Biology is the closest thing that we have to [those courses]. It amazes me that we’ve taken Conservation 8, and Vertebrate Anatomy and put it into one semester.” (Charles Smith, 2006)

## 31. Conservation

Hamilton was a naturalist who saw things others overlooked. He was fascinated by the woods around New York and used every opportunity to get out into the woods and study nature.

“He was instrumental in creating a biological Field Station in Rensselaerville which is about 20-30 miles from Albany and 120 miles from Ithaca which is in beautiful area. It turned out

“I still remember the excellent ideas that you had at the Huyck Preserve.”  
(David E. Davis, DBB)

that in a quiet way it achieved real prominence. Important work was done at that station. It's called the Huyck Preserve in Rensselaerville, NY. It was the place where Don Griffin of bat echolocation came. One summer he did the first experiments on life of bats [who were] following moving objects while in flight. Hamilton was influential in getting the station set up. I was later on the chairman of the science committee that does the research at that station and I think it was the 25th anniversary or something like that, where I was asked to put the program together and I managed to get Bill Hamilton to come and lecture. He gave a lecture on founding this place. I wish we had taped it. We didn't and there's not much for record of his involvement with that. But Don Griffin threw rocks into the air in order for bats to dive for them and then he gradually began his work at Harvard where he found that bats can pursue insect prey in the dark by sending out high-frequency sounds that bounce off the target. It would use the echo to find their target. It was also a place where Ed Raney, a professor of Conservation at Cornell did his... classical work on food chain in lakes. It's also a place where a very famous ecologist [Eugene Edum]...did his work on the ecological succession of plants by looking at abandoned farms [which were] which were abandoned during different years of the Depression and looked at what was going on there when the farmer moves out. He published a classic series of papers on botanical succession. It was all made possible by the station. In fact Raney, [Eugene Edum] and Griffin were all there one summer when I was there at Rensselaerville at the Field Station I found the photograph that showed all three standing together that summer. It is a classic photograph.” (Tom Eisner, 2006)

“I've been over to the Huyck Preserve and I know that it is considered a valuable field site and the place to be but it's a really remarkable area.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

### NATURALIST TO ECOLOGIST

“His knowledge was surprisingly extensive. I don't think that his breadth was a weakness of today's science at all, but I think that the boundaries have been pulled in, and the focus is more limited and more in depth. Back then it was broader. That was the nature of scientific investigation. The specialist knows more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing. There's more detail, because there's more ways to examine the detail. We have techniques that we didn't have back then.” (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

There's been a significant change from a hunter-fisherman approach towards a laboratory-based approach of the science. Hamilton was a member of an ensemble of professors who shone brightly during their professorships. As a student in natural resources today, the department has moved from field natural history to ecology, which is more theory based and computer-based. There still are courses in ichthyology and ornithology, and they're starting up a mammalogy course again. There still is that infrastructure, and that importance based on direct observation and taxonomy, but there has been a shift in our department, as part of a larger trend at the University and universities worldwide. Shifts away from first-hand, hands-on biology. Individuals have tended toward specialization, and one of the astounding things about Bill was that he published papers on reptiles, mammals and birds, in addition to all the plant work he has done.

### 32. Ecological Society, NSF panel & American Society of Mammalogists

I remember one gal wanted to get a grant at the University of Alaska, to study snowshoe rabbit and its impact of vegetation. And she was going to put up an enclosure all around the area of about 10 acres to -- with chicken wire mesh to keep out the arctic foxes and the coyotes who invaded the area and the few remaining wolves. And make it predator free. He and the whole Board down there are overlooked great horned owls and other avian predators. And I said, "We can't give her the money for this." So she didn't get a [grant] but isn't it funny how people overlook such commonplace..." (H.I.)

Hamilton would either be mistaken or pass himself off as a gardener or a janitor. "Those were his two favorites." (John Whitaker, 2006)

"There was a meeting in Illinois, an American Society of Mammalogists meeting, and they were supposed to use one room, it had been announced that there were going to use this one room to have... a committee meeting... A society member's wife goes into the room and she ran into this person in there and said that he wondered if the room could be changed to another room. The reason he gave is that he was the janitor and his wife and six kids were all sick at home and it would help him considerably if they could change rooms. And so that's a story she got. She went to Don Hofmeister who was the mammalogist at the University of Illinois. I think he was the chair of the major meeting for that year. So Hofmeister said, "So where is that fella?" Hofmeister went to find him and of course it was Bill Hamilton." (John Whitaker, 2006)

"At a combined meeting of the mammalogists and ichthyologists in Higgins Lake Michigan. Higgins Lake was a conservation camp... Out there everyone was kidding him all the time. I remember somebody giving him a cigar that exploded. He loved cigars. He was never suspicious of this guy and he gave them an exploding cigar. The thing blew up while we were sitting around the table at lunch." (Howard Evans, 2006)

### 33.Social Gathering

#### **Uninvited Wedding Guests**

When Dilger's daughter got married, we drove the Hamilton's to the wedding and reception. The reception was in a small country meeting house and by the time we got there from the church, the crowd was thick and the food moving fast. Bill worked the room, full plate in hand, booming about the great food and by-the-way what was this gathering about anyway - or - he was passing by, saw the cars, stopped in and now who should he thank for the great spread. An hour or so, later, Nellie who kept muttering that she didn't want anyone to think "that" of her, struggled to keep up so she could explain that they had been invited. Since her explanations were longer than his riffs, she was always three groups behind. We were convulsed. I did not dare to put anything in my mouth. Could hardly stand up straight for laughing. Remembering the look on those people's faces - and the determination on Nellie's - doubles me over even now. (Nina Lambert, 2006)

#### **Impersonating Liberty Hyde Bailey**

As Bill came to register for the meeting he proceeded to sign in as Liberty Hyde Bailey, the retired dean of the school of agriculture. The secretary's eyes lit up realizing that the dean must be in his 90's, "Oh Mr. Bailey how nice of you to attend". He was then ushered to the front of the auditorium. (Unknown source)

"Another one that I was in on: My wife and I went to our first mammal meeting in 1962 which was the year that I graduated with a Ph.D. from Cornell under Hamilton. She went with me, my wife and I, "Now you know that when you run into Hamilton he's going to do something unexpected." Well she was still not prepared when he introduced her as his wife -and he was 25 at the time and he made it stick. Of course he had to do some explaining that all that." (John Whitaker, 2006)

"You know Allen and Kellogg were a pair. Allen was the ornithologist and Kellogg was partly a physicist and did the records and the frog call records himself. I don't know if Allen was involved with the frog call records but Kellogg was. Anyways, these records were very nice - I have a set yet. They were very nicely done and Peter Paul's voice was the one on the records. Anyhow the records came out and they decided to have a get-together commemorating these records. And so the story goes, again I wasn't there, Hamilton used to drink quite a lot - he stopped. I don't think you drink at all in the last few years and knew him. But earlier he did drink quite a bit and that story goes that at that party they missed Hamilton and they found him outside by a pool, somewhat inebriated, imitating frog calls." (John Whitaker, 2006)



## 34. The War Years

Hamilton volunteered for the service out of a sense of obligation. He was sent to Boston to take a crash course in German. The army expected the war to end slowly and they wanted men who could govern a major city one by one as they fell. Bill left three kids behind when he went to the war, “Yes, yes. Dirty trick.” (H.I.)

He wanted to enlist but was rejected several times. Finally, he was approached by the army because of his skills and training. He went in as a captain and served for four years. At the close of the war, in April 1945, he became the military governor of Mannheim, a city of seven hundred thousand. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, H.I.)

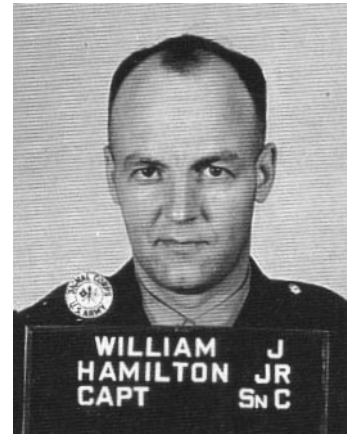


Figure 7: Captain Hamilton

“Hamilton enrolled in the Army and was immediately drafted as a major and he was involved in rodent control all over. You can just imagine him in the Army. Raney joined the Navy as a second officer and a Destroyer escort - one of these ships that went around the big ones to chase the submarines away. Raney and Hamilton were away during the war and Hutt ran the department.” (Howard Evans, 2006)

During World War II Hamilton used his specialties to control rodent infestations in Army kitchens and storehouses. He did all he could to control these vermin as well as document the spoiled bags of coffee and wheat. In one such photograph Hamilton had spelled out the word “RATS” with the carcasses of dozens of rats. In the background of the photograph is an extermination gun. (In another picture, Hamilton documented the rodent damage to hymn books and candlesticks. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

### Canadian Border Crossing

“There is the Canadian border crossing [story]. Hamilton and at least two others, I think Ollie Hewitt was one of them [and] I don't know if Bill Dilger was there or not. They were returning to Cornell from some meetings. The meetings may have been in Detroit. Anyways, the shortest distance is to go through Canada. This was during the Second World War. They had gone into Canada and were coming back out of Canada when they stopped at the border. When they stopped at the border they would ask you, “What is your name and where were you born?” Hamilton was asleep in the back seat and the other people in the car answered the questions. [Then] the border guard said, “What about him?” And somebody nudged him. He opened his eyes suddenly and sat up and spoke only German and he wouldn't stop speaking German. I don't know if the guard pulled his gun or not. I wouldn't doubt it. Pull them all into the office -interrogated them literally an hour or more the way I heard it [while] Hamilton only spoke German. The other guys are absolutely panicked because this was war time. We were fighting Germany at the time.” (Harrison Ambrose, 2006)

“During the war, I guess, as the war was ending, daddy sent back to sheets of Hitler stamps, and money, it was useless. My mother turned the hands of profit on those later.” (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, H.I.)

“I also remember the pride you had when you went into the service and the fact that the first time I saw you after you got out you were obviously having a wonderful time hunting field mice.” (Eph Palmer, DBB)


### 35. Emeritus

Hamilton retired on February 1, 1963 and was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus of Conservation.



Dear Bill -

Retiring? Don't try to kid us. We'll be seeing more of you than ever. Here's to the many years of happy association in the past - and to the many years of it to come. Good hunting!

 Bob McClung

What sort of audacity is this – to retire?  
This will surely arouse much faculty ire!

Who will find out what the animals ate?  
Who will watch garter snakes as they mate?

Who will test the salamanders to test them for tea?  
Who will take lampreys out of a pocket and send them to see?

Who will inspire grad students toward little-known fates?  
And keep them so busy there is not time for their dates?

Mammalogy meeting will be so dull  
For with Wild Bill there, there was never a lull.

Instead you will encourage the grass and the trees,  
And buzz ‘round the garden like a new hive of bees.

You will no doubt hybridize the unsuspecting lilies,  
And plant them all around with plate-sized ‘dillies.

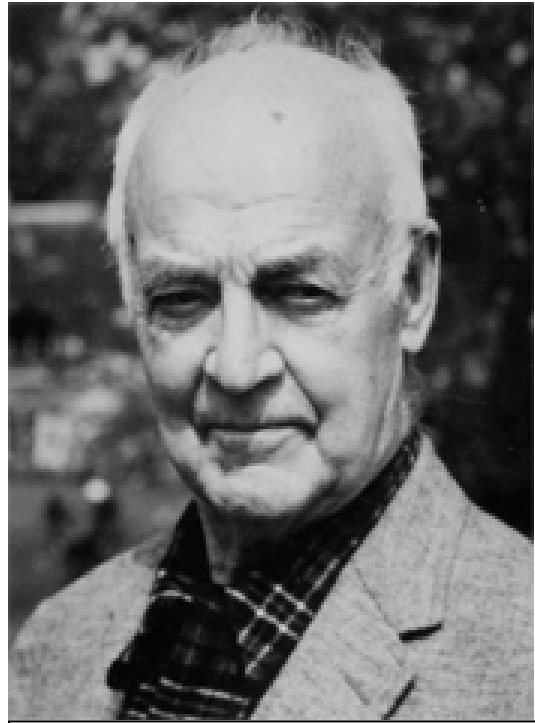
You’ll fight those millions of bright yellow dandelions,  
And spray them with a mixture of dangerous ions.

No one can rival the Hamilton Posies.  
For no one else waters them all with Four Roses.

There will soon be a hill of the best chrysanthemums  
All with flowers gay, to make the Ruby-throats hum!

Cornell University has never known such a man –  
But in his retirement, we wish him the best in the land!!  
(Meg Stewart Lemon (or Limon), DBB)

My wife, whom you have insisted on  
calling “Mrs. Cunningham” for years, joins  
me in honoring you on this occasion.  
(Larry Hamilton (no relation), DBB)



**Figure 8: Hamilton in later years**

His student’s fervent loyalty and love is,  
“reflected in a book they gave me on my  
retirement from my former students. And they –  
it’s always pleased me to read the letters. I still  
take it off the shelf and read it. It’s entitled, ‘Dear  
Bill.’” (H.I.)

“We expect[ed] good 10 more  
years of [you].” (Albert and Anna  
Wright, Dear Bill Book)

“This is truly remarkable; not that you are retiring at this time, but that you have survived  
long enough to retire. When I recall the hazards of ancient and decrepit automobiles,  
your experiments with laboratory preservatives, arduous field trips, your diet, etc. etc., it  
would seem that you are a long shot.” (William F. Royce, DBB)

“Always remember the old adage that “mammalogists never tire – they just scat on and on! When you move out of your office, “I can visualize muted sounds of flying fur, rustling rodent teeth, and canny calculations of reptilian scutes emerging from the bowels of Fernow Hall.” (Max Hensley, DBB)

## THE BIOLOGICAL DIVISION AT CORNELL

I stayed in that until such time as they established the new Biological Division. I saw the handwriting on the wall that I would have to be drawn into that, and probably less emphasis placed on the field I was interested in, and possibly it would be dropped entirely.

With the coming and going of departments and the constant restructuring of the biological sciences at the university, it was difficult for incoming students to know where to turn for their course selections or advising. Hamilton, himself, was employed as a vertebrate zoologist in the department of entomology. An incoming student was unable to get a “well rounded background in biology” because of the fractured system at Cornell. The biological sciences were split between the Arts and the Ag campus, between the departments of entomology, plant pathology, botany, zoology, and conservation. (L.K.Todd, H.I.)

When the Comstocks passed away, Cornell’s commitment to nature studies declined, “Cornell was world renowned for a great many years for the field of natural history and field biology. And with the decline at the end of the Comstock era [it took a turn] for the worse.” Cornell moved away from the study of natural history. What had attracted students from the world over declined in 1962. The administration brought in a panel of five outside experts, “none of them in field biology,” to assess the biological sciences at Cornell. “We were all interviewed by them for thirty minutes and they wanted to know what we had published in the last five years...And they looked down their long noses. [They thought that] this wasn’t research. This wasn’t zoology. It was this committee that Hamilton blamed for the shift towards laboratory biology. Refusing to move into the new biological division, he decided to take an early retirement at the age of sixty. (H.I.)

Hamilton spoke to several of the Deans who were non-committal and who were caught up in the larger trend of shifting biological sciences nationwide. But he did not go directly to the administration with his concerns. In any case, “I had made up my mind, I was going to retire.”

“The change from naturalist to ecologist, I cannot and do not want to attribute that to some lesser ability or

“I think the tide is turning now and it's going back somewhat natural history.” (H.I.)
--

declining interest of the department, but it's a change in the whole scientific nature of natural history. Natural history was at that time, the in-hand study of nature... In Bill's office back then you would have seen cages with animals in them. You would've seen carcasses that he was dissecting. You don't see carcasses on anybody's desk in Fernow Hall today. It's different.” (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

“Cornell, unlike many institutions, has retained an interest in natural history to the present day. An interest in natural history has never been lost at this university like it has

at many when molecular biology came into vogue in the 60s and 70s a lot of places gave up their natural history collections. They were expensive to maintain, and at that time, they weren't being used heavily. Cornell kept its collection and now they're even improved. Current modern ecology is quantitative, but I think the Cornell brand of modern ecology has a significant emphasis on natural history - which is good. More so than the brand of modern ecology that is practiced elsewhere. There are other places that have carried on this grand tradition as well, but it has never left Cornell. At some general level Bill Hamilton's approach and tradition are being carried on." (Peter Marks, 2006)

Hamilton left with the rise of cellular biology and the decline of field biology, "In the present era of intense interest in cellular biology there are all too few who will follow your pattern of a wide interest in the biology, ecology, and economic relations of the vertebrates, from fishes to mammals. For this reason it is important that you keep on in your chosen path and write up much of the background accumulated during busy years in the field and laboratory. (Tracy I. Storer, DBB)

Bill was still active at the university after he retired, Verne Rockcastle, "Asked him to take my class of field natural history out to Connecticut Hill and do some fieldwork with him, so they could see Hamilton in action. When he met the class he had socks dangling from his belt. He probably had 10 socks knotted, with the knot up above the belt and a sock hanging down. There was something in the socks. So we got out there and we went to a pond at Connecticut Hill. He was talking about Garter snakes. He took out the first of his socks, this undid the knot and in the first of the sock was a Garter snake -- a gravid female. Then he took out of his pocket some scissors, and he proceeded to open up the stomach of this gravid female. The class just couldn't believe that this guy was opening up a live snake. He cut up in the snake and released about a dozen live Garter snakes. She was a gravid female. She was pregnant, and he wanted them to see what the young snakes were like. And that she was carrying them. While he had gone out in the field and found this gravid Garter snake -- after all he had to look for one. He found one, put it in the sock and brought it on the field trip. Well, he did the same kind of thing with other animals. He talked about a bullfrog. He took one of the socks out, and in the sock was a bullfrog. Each sock had an animal that he was going to talk about on that field trip. He had gone out and collected all these. That took a few hours to do all that, but he had done it. This is kind of guy he was. Almost nothing fazed him." (Verne Rockcastle, 2006)

### 36. Cornell Plantations

“[He was] driven by curiosity. He would stop to listen and stop to look and take the time to investigate things along the trail that he hadn't seen before or even in his own garden. I spent time with when he lived in Cayuga Heights looking at his plants and talking with them about the natural areas system. I was chairman of that at the time. I just remember him on a routine trip out to look at something or to show a group of people some of his lilies which he had such great success with. He always had stories about how these were - better than, or equal to, or not as good as, whatever the case was - with the flowers. He was always able to compare the places it he had seen plants. On the way up to do some specific thing he would see something along the way were to take an extra 10 or 15 minutes to get to the place that you wanted to go because he never ceased to see stuff.” (Mike Richmond, 2006)

“One of the things that I really liked about Hamilton is that when he was on a Cornell Plantations Natural Areas Committee, there were policy issues about the gardens and natural areas. Fringed Gentian is a small local flower which is rare here in Ithaca and state listed as rare in New York. This plant is a short-lived species, which is not very well understood, and it's a very delicate little thing. Ithaca is one of the few places in New York, where it occurs. In fact, we have a natural area, whose sole purpose is to provide habitat for this one species. The worry was if we didn't do things just right, then we were going to lose it. He had a different point of view, that I think was too seldom expressed, which is that this species has been around here for thousands of years, since the glaciers receded, and we haven't been doing squat to manage habitat for the benefit of the species and yet it is still here. So despite our neglect, and after all our changes in habitat – after our forests have been cleared for farming and [now] farms have been abandoned [and] returned the forest - this species has managed to stay here. I don't think he worried too much about the long-term welfare of the species if it has been able to tough itself out, for this long after all these human caused changes -- many of which were not to the benefit of this plant. At the time I didn't know what to make of his comments but as the years have gone on and I have developed more of my own way of thinking about these things, I have come around to that same point of view. I think that we worry way too much about protecting certain species when they're likely to do just fine on their own. He was a real contrarian in some ways, but a well founded contrarian, who believed that what he was saying was based on good sound reasoning and evidence.” (Peter Marks, 2006)

## 37. Gardening

“The care of plants, bulbs and five acres of mushrooms should keep you well occupied. A naturalist is very fortunate in that he seeks new knowledge at all times into the marvels of outdoor life about him. So many men retire with no interest outside of business.” (Luther Little, DBB)

“He had a gorgeous garden, he had a big yard. There was a semicircular area with the lawn in the middle and this big, wide border running all around. The linear distance was huge. He grew a huge variety of plants, many of which were very interesting and unique. He had an English oak that he had pruned into a dwarf oak so it never grew more than a few feet tall; however, the genetic potential of the plant was that it could grow into a big oak tree. He transformed it into something really wonderful

because he had an eye and a gift for pruning and for horticulture. He told me once that he had 125 varieties of daffodils. He had daffodils that began to bloom in the end of March to the beginning of June - for four months. April was the peak and early May, but he had some really early ones and some really late ones that stretched out the season.” (Peter Marks, 2006)

“It was very important to Hamilton to have the very first daffodils of the spring. There would often be snow still on the ground and he would have the first daffodils. This went on year after year and finally someone looked and he was sticking plastic daffodils in the ground.” (Harrison Ambrose, 2006)

Bill tried to hide his kindness, “He never wanted anybody to know about it. He called me up one day and said, “Hey.” I said, “Yeah, Bill.” “You got a hundred 4” pots.” I said, “I don’t know Bill, I could go down and count them and see.” So I went down and counted them. Then I finally came back and I said, “Yes I have. I’ll wash them out and bring them down to you.” He said, “No, no, no. Don’t do that I’ll get them.” I said suit yourself, you know, and he came up. I said, “What are you going to do with them?” He sort of evaded the question. It didn’t care what he was going to do with them. He was welcome. Later somebody else tell me what he was going to do. He

Upon hearing that Professor Hamilton was about to retire and divert his energies towards plants, William H. Burt teased him, “Rumor has it that you might divert your energies to growing mushrooms and lettuce (the kind one eats) for the market. If true, this would be a tremendous loss to science – I hope you will consider this seriously before making a final decision. May I call your attention to the food surpluses we now have stockpiled? To add to this would mean an extra burden on the poor taxpayer. (William H. Burt, author of Peterson’s Mammal Field Guide, DBB)

A man who visited Hamilton’s garden said “What a beautiful garden you have here.” Hamilton nonchalantly remarked, “Oh this is nothing, you should see the mushroom tunnels they run from here to Cayuga Heights.” (Ray Ogelsby, 2006)

It was from Cornell that people around the country would, “look forward to obtaining on-the-spot reports of tulips blooming through eight feet of snow or to receiving blooming marigolds from Cornell in mid-winter.” (George Sprugel Jr., DBB)



would wait to the fall, when the bulbs are for sale at Agway and later in October when they are half sale, he'd buy a whole bunch of hyacinth bulbs and pot them up in his garage. Then in the spring when they start to show some growth he would take them up to the hospital. He would give them to anybody who needs flowers. He didn't want me to know that, see." (Bill Dilger, 2006)

"He would grow vegetables in this garden among the flowers and things. A bunch of lettuce here or there... He had leeks. I said, "What do you grow leeks in there for?" 'Cause he had a vegetable garden down at the bottom of the hill in the flat. He said, "Well, when the old ladies come around I like to say, I often like to take a leek out in the garden." – and he'd open up. "Oh Bill!" – People would say that a lot." (Bill Dilger, 2006)

#### **Classical Music Tapes**

Bill was ecstatic when portable tape players came out because he could listen to classical music while in the garden. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

After his retirement, Hamilton became very active in the American Rock Garden Society. He published several articles in their bulletin on topics ranging from Fall Crocuses to Hardy Cyclamens. It was Hamilton who showed that dozens of plants could be grown here in Ithaca in this harsh environment if the right care were provided. (H.I.)

Hamilton would become fascinated with a particular group of species and try to collect as many of those from around the world at a time. Whether it was dwarf willows or daffodils, "Will he was always a gardener but he put his full energy into it after he retired. He was particularly interested in Jack-in-the-Pulpits. He wanted to get Jack in the pulpits from all over the world. If someone was going anywhere he would ask them to bring them back bulbs of Jack in the pulpit. His garden was really something he had unusual plants and he showed people that a lot of plants could be kept up in Ithaca here even though they weren't winter hardy. He managed to grow a lot of things that weren't winter hardy." (Howard Evans, 2006)

#### **Bill's Special Compost**

The president of Cornell's wife stopped by his garden one day and asked him, begged him, "Professor Hamilton how do you keep your garden so beautiful and lush." He leaned in and spoke softly revealing one of his most precious secrets, "It's all in the compost my dear." Bill then proceeded to tell her the ingredients of his compost, which must've lasted two pages single-spaced, including things like eggshells, coffee grounds and chicken manure. Diligently she wrote down the recipe and followed the instructions to a T. The recipe and all of its instructions, he had made up on the spot.

"I saw him eat worms when [I was] at his house gardening... He would take an earthworm and just pop the right down. He had an amazing capacity to swallow what most of us would consider to be disgusting." (Peter Marks, 2006)

#### **Worms in the Garden**

"Bill called one morning asking whether there were little green worms eating my Aquilegia. Yes. Could he come down and see. Yes. He appeared shortly thereafter. We found an aquilegia and I pulled a worm from the underside of a leaf and handed it to him. He popped in his mouth and announced "Yep, same little green worms." (Damn trusting that I hadn't sprayed - though most sprays turns them brown almost instantly.) (Nina Lambert, 2006)

#### **Rabbits in the Trash**

“He used to tell of putting a litter of live young rabbits that he caught in the top of his garbage pail at the curb and waiting in the bushes for the garbage pick-up truck to arrive. Whoever lifted off the lid to hoist the pail onto the truck had an unseasonable Easter treat: hopping bunnies heading off in all directions.” (Nina Lambert, 2006)

#### **White Lab coat**

Bill Hamilton would tell his students that if you wanted to collect a plant, all you needed was a white lab coat and a clipboard. You would have all the credibility you’d need. (Bill Dilger, 2006)

#### **Rare Lily**

On one of his regular garden tours, a local Garden Lady remarked with astonishment, “Mr. Hamilton, that is a beautiful dwarf willow. Where on earth did you get it?” “Well, I was traveling in Alaska, and I just opened up the helicopter door and there it was right in front of me. I just grabbed a clump and it grew.” The lady replied, “Mr. Hamilton, don’t you lead an exciting life.” -- Often times Professor Hamilton would have graduate students and friends send him seeds from their travels. (Unknown source)

#### **105 Year Old Man**

Bob Mower who taught the introductory course to woody plants in the... Dept of Horticulture at [Cornell University] took his class on field trips in the spring, stopping at Hamilton’s first, here next. Always when they arrived here, half the class was dazzled; the other half, dazed. That glazed-over look of bewilderment was a wonder to behold... [A] young man who pulled me aside to ask, “Is Dr. Hamilton really 105 years old?” (Nina Lambert, 2006)

#### **Labeling Poison Ivy**

Someone recently recounted when visiting his garden on a National garden tour, 1982, he had various clumps of poison ivy labeled – in Latin - and a rock with blue flowers painted on it stuck high in a tree with a card explaining of how *Eritrichium nanum*, a Western alpine, needed a site with good drainage. (Nina Lambert, 2006)

#### **Sleep with Lady of the House**

“As Bill was working one afternoon in his garden, a lady pulled up in her car and remarked “what a beautiful garden you have here. Are you the Gardener?” Bill replied, “Why, yes I am.” She asked, “Do you garden anywhere else?” “No, just here.” The woman asked, “Would you work anywhere else?” Bill replied that he would. The woman leaned out and then asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, how much do they pay you here?” Bill then told her, “The pay’s not that great, but every now and then I get to sleep with the lady of the house.”” (Tom Eisner, 2006)

## 38.Final Years

Bill Hamilton taught us all that we don't have to scour the world to find our fortune. Sometimes the most important thing to investigate is our own back yard. "I can't help but try to find out things that are new and different and it gives me a great deal of pleasure in uncovering things that have not been demonstrated in the past before." (H.I.)

### **Take Anything You Want**

Bill Dress was visiting Mr. Hamilton in his last years. Hamilton knew he was dying and he looked to Bill and said, "Bill I want you to take something from the garden. Take whatever you want -absolutely anything." Dress said, "No, no, no, I don't want anything." Hamilton insisted and insisted. Finally Dress named the plant he would have liked "Oh, no! You can't have that!" Hamilton incredulously replied. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

"In fact Bill you have seem to be having a wonderful time whether you were writing, cutting up a stinking carcass, waiting in a stream help in some young fellow with his work, or showing a flower garden to some visiting fireman." (Eph Palmer, DBB)

### **Cook on the Queen Mary**

When Bill was in his mid-80's he was coming into the emergency room. They asked him what his occupation was – He replied, a cook on the Queen Mary – Ruth said to the nurse, "No, no don't listen to him, he's just pulling your leg". It was terribly difficult trying to straighten it out. (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

Alternately: He was the cook on the titanic. (June Hamilton, 2006)

### **Swallowing the Key**

One afternoon as Ruth Hamilton Fisher and her father were leaving the hospital she asked, "Do you have the key, dad?" "Yes and no. I swallowed it." ("Well, we have a problem. I swallowed it.") "Why did you do that?" "Well I didn't have anyplace to put it in the hospital gown." The nurse who was nearby began to make arrangements for an x-ray. "Oh he's just pulling your leg, we'll be fine." (Ruth Hamilton Fisher, 2006)

### **Where are My Pants?**

Bill came back from the hospital, having had some broken ribs x-rayed. Nellie was upstairs in bed. (When anything happened to Bill, Nellie vied to be the patient). Ruth opening the garage door for him and, seeing that his pants were stained, told him to take them off so she could put them in the washing machine in the basement. Bill did and then went upstairs to let Nellie know that he was back. Nellie took one look and exclaimed, "Where are your pants!" Bill straight-faced, "Oh, I must have left them at the hospital." Nellie told Ruth to take him right back to get them. (Nina Lambert, 2006)

*William J. Hamilton died on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1990 at his home in Ithaca. May his memory be a blessing and a teaching for his students and the world.*

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## 39. Methods

Through personal interviews, contact with the Hamilton family, as well as library and archival research, I created the abbreviated biography of William J. Hamilton, Jr. The primary source of information for this project was interviews of Bill's colleagues, friends and students, either in person if at all possible or on the phone. I conducted over twenty-seven interviews ranging from fifteen minutes to over three hours. When I had permission from the interviewee, I recorded these sessions using a digital voice recorder, otherwise I took notes. To organize the recorded data I cut the audio recording into auditory segments based on topic and sorted them into a concept map (see Fig. 9). This allowed me to spatially organize the stories people shared and allowed me to directly link to audio or text files. To transcribe the longer segments I used voice recognition software called, Dragon Naturally Speaking 9.0. This process proved to be much faster than typing out the texts.

The Kroch Rare and Archives Library at Cornell had a file on Professor Hamilton with two invaluable resources. First, the *William J. Hamilton, Jr. Oral Histories*, conducted by L.K. Todd in 1986 and secondly, the *Dear Bill Book* which was given to him by his colleagues and friends up his retirement. In addition, the Hamilton family provided many documents and photographs of Professor Hamilton. I also reviewed his prolific writing which appeared in his books and journal articles.

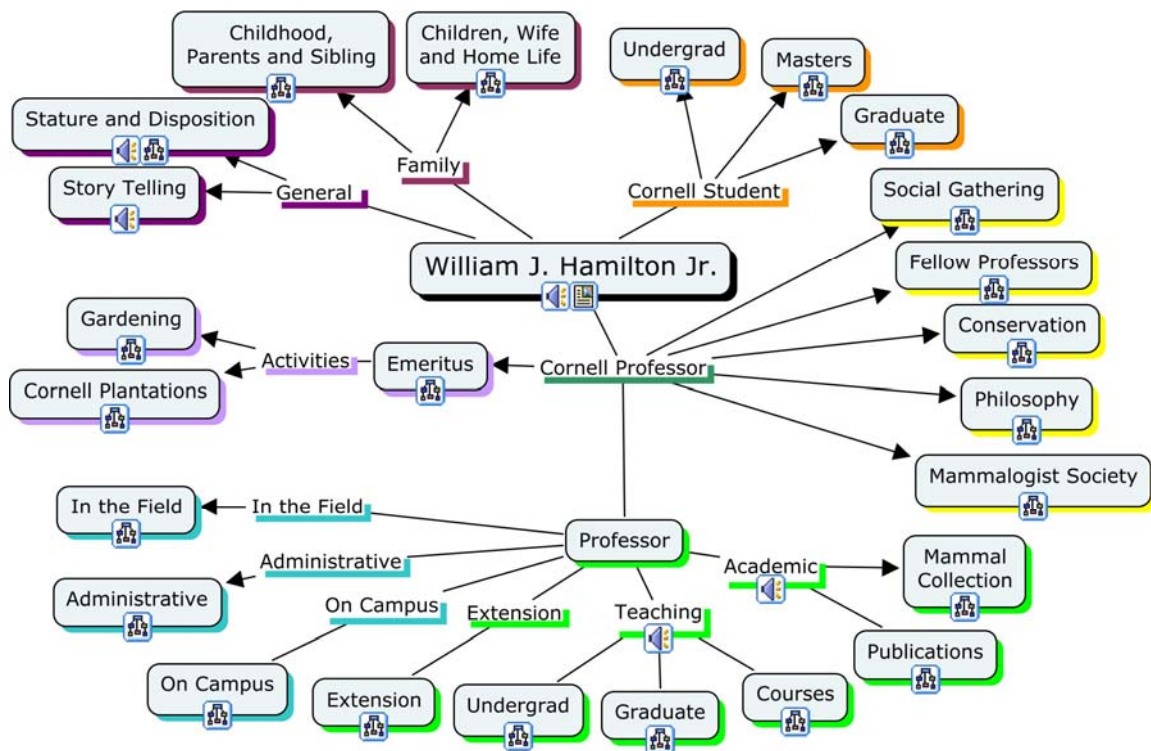


Figure 9: Cmap created to organize audio interviews and texts accumulated during research